



Dead Girl Walking by Calla Mae

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Summary: Their fractured family moved halfway across the country, and Veronica was the only thing holding them together. A short tempered step father, an ex boyfriend for a step brother, and a sister she was trying her best to get out of there. But something else escaped from Hawkins lab and its sights were set on Veronica, she was dead girl walking. OC/Billy

1. We can be beautiful, just not today

This is an idea I had when I first watched season two and never got around to writing. Fast forward to me finishing season three and here we are. This starts with them just getting to Hawkins, and as the story progresses you'll get more of the backstory. Billy's gonna be a little softer with my OC Veronica, but not by much. Shit hits the fan in chapter 3, with a creature of my own making, and once it starts it's not gonna stop. So get ready, buckle up, because it's gonna be a messy ride.

The room was small, cramped even, and it was made smaller by the two beds shoved against adjacent walls. "This sucks," Max muttered as she threw herself on the bed.

Standing by the half filled bookshelf with a stack of books in hand Veronica said, "it's not that bad."

"We're sharing a dresser," Max told her, as if she didn't already know; as if Veronica hadn't thrown out half her clothes to make more room.

Veronica sighed setting the stack on a shelf and climbing on the bed beside her. She wasn't any happier to leave in the middle of her senior year and have to share the smallest room in the house with her little sister – but she was the oldest, happy or not this was her job. "We've made do with worse," she said with a shrug. Max was still frowning. "Besides I go to college next year, you'll have the whole room to yourself."

She sat hugging her knees to her chest and replied in a soft voice, "that's not what I meant." Max looked up at her not liking the idea of her being gone, she had a hard time picturing what home was without her in it.

"I know," Veronica said wishing she knew what to say to make it better. But words weren't enough this time. "You're right, this sucks," she admitted watching Max's face open with surprise. "I don't wanna have to start over. But it is what it is." Get over it, it's basically what her mom told her and Max glared at the floor. "I'm glad I'm not doing it alone."

Glancing at Veronica out of the corner of her eye Max saw she was smiling, the small one where the corner of her eyes were squinting slightly. She pursed her mouth not ready to give in.

"Come on," Veronica cooed knocking her elbow against Max's arm. "You know you wanna."

"Whatever," Max groaned rolling her eyes, but not before Veronica caught her faint grin. "You sound like one of your stupid books."

She quickly wrapped her arms around Max's small shoulders and gave a tight squeeze before she slid off the bed and returned to the bookshelf. She set about fixing the potted flower in the center of the shelf and arranged the porcelain figurines her grandmother gave her every birthday. Max watched her twist the figures this way and that, switching them all around before changing them back. Billy called her anal, Max didn't really know what that meant.

"Where's Neil and Susan?"

Speak of the devil. Max turned scowling at where Billy leaned in the doorway his eyes fixed on Veronica. "They went to get pizza."

He traced the length of her back and the span of her hips as she bent to grab another stack of books from the box. His tongue snaked along his lips. "How long ago did they leave?" he asked, his voice lowered to a growl.

Max's face twisted knowing where he was looking, it's where he was always looking. And Veronica alphabetized her books pretending she was unaware he'd crept past the doorway with mischief and hunger in his eyes. "A while ago, they should be back any minute."

"How far away's the place?" His boots struck the ground as he snuck closer to the far wall, his blue eyes glittering.

"How should I know?" Max sneered trying to get a rise out of him, to get his eyes off her sister. Veronica was his sister now too, but that didn't seem to matter.

His hands came around her waist and he pulled her against him burying his nose in her hair breathing in the smell of her floral

shampoo. "Think we got enough time?" he grumbled dragging his teeth over the nape of her neck as his hands danced beneath her ribcage pulling at her shirt.

A sigh left her and she leaned against him letting him hold her up. Her eyes fluttered shut at his slick tongue running along her jaw. "Depends on how good you are," she answered, her voice a heavy breath.

He hummed against her cheek wrapping his arms around her middle. "Baby I'm always good." Without warning he hauled her off her feet carrying her out into the hall, and while she laughed startled and amused his teeth carved a malicious grin.

Max watched them go with a sullen glare. It hadn't been so bad when it was just Veronica and Billy. But then their parents got married and it wasn't just Veronica and Billy anymore. They couldn't be Veronica and Billy anymore, and they hated it. And Max hated them.

The door to his room hit the wooden frame with a booming crack and her back hit the wall with a dull thud leaving her ears ringing. She raised a hand to brush the hair out of her face but her head was thrown back hitting the wall again as he kissed her, and the hand she'd raised came around his shoulders.

He felt her sigh as he settled against her, his hips pressed firmly against hers. They hadn't done this in weeks and he hated how much he'd missed it. He loved her, so much he wanted to kill her.

At a muffled clap they both stilled, their mouths held open against each others their tongues still pressed together as they breathed waiting. Another clap and they sighed pulling apart.

From behind the wall came a familiar knock; two taps a pause and another tap. Veronica knocked twice in response letting Max know they'd heard. Max met Neil and her mother at the door. "I'm starving," she said following her mother to the kitchen, looking back to see Neil's eyes on Billy's closed door.

He moved down the hall glancing at the girls' room seeing an unorganized stack of books forgotten on a shelf – and that really

wasn't like her. His blood boiled as he stalked to Billy's room throwing open the door where it slammed into the toe of Billy's boot.

"Jesus Christ," Billy exclaimed meeting his father's stern eye.

Neil looked from the poster and tape in Billy's hand to the closet on the other side of the room where Veronica was holding a rolled up poster looking at him curiously. He didn't buy it, not one goddamn second. "Dinner's ready," he told them, his voice level and his eyes on his son.

It was always gonna be his fault. "Mind if I finish hanging this up first?" he asked, a hint of defiance curled in his tone.

A heavy breath left through his nose like a bull ready to charge. "Seriously?" They both turned to Veronica seeing the poster she'd unraveled was of a blonde woman in a string bikini.

"Damn straight," Billy said dropping the Metallica poster and moving to grab the one Veronica had. "And she's gonna go right here." He held it up to the wall and turned to her grinning.

Rolling her eyes she moved around him and headed for the kitchen, passing a stern-faced Neil still blocking the doorway. He waited until she grabbed the plates to help set the table before he closed the door and turned to Billy.

"What?"

"Cut the crap," he warned seeing from the way Billy swallowed his first thought had been right. "She's your sister now you keep your goddamn hands off her, is that clear?"

"Yes sir," Billy answered.

After another long look Neil turned for the kitchen where Veronica stood passing out pizza slices on plates to Susan, and then to Max after Max finished setting the glasses and napkins. She was a good girl, respectful. He took the plate she handed him holding her wide-eyed stare, it made her look innocent even though he knew she wasn't. He should be harder on her. She smiled sweetly, warmly, and he was wrapped once more around her finger as he reached a hand to

ruffle her long auburn hair.

As he made his way to the table she turned for the hall, her smile falling as Billy still didn't come out. With a sigh she slapped two slices on a second plate and carried both his and hers to the table. She set his plate in the space across from her and slid into the seat beside Max with Neil at the head of the table on her left.

"Where the hell is he?" Neil demanded turning for the hall with a heavy sigh.

"I forgot the salad," Veronica said jumping up. "You want salad mom? Neil?" She looked from her mother to Neil, both of whom nodded. She made her way to the kitchen grabbing a large bowl, she set it on the counter and glanced at the table seeing both her mother and Neil looking at Max as she stalled them.

Slipping into the hall she walked back to Billy's room wasting enough time to grab any part of him, which happened to be the collar of his shirt, and dragged him to the kitchen. She opened the fridge looking for the lettuce. "I already got your pizza," she whispered when he moved around her to reach for a plate. Grabbing the bag of lettuce she held it up to him and rifled around for the dressing.

Max was telling them about the comic she was reading, it was the only thing she could think of after Veronica nudged her before running off to make a salad. This was their life now, covering for Billy to keep Neil from yelling.

"If he is not out here in the next ten seconds," Neil fumed as he turned once more for the hall. He found his son dumping the lettuce in the bowl while Veronica grabbed everything else.

"Can you get the bacon?"

"You actually gonna eat a salad?" was her quick retort, knowing he'd just put it on the pizza. But she grabbed the small yellow bag and handed it to him. They made their way to the table and settled in the tense silence as Neil stared heavily at his son who refused to look at him. "Can you pass the water?" she asked looking at her quiet mother. She first filled Max's cup then her own then Neil's before

setting it back on the table and reaching for the salad.

"Is everyone excited for school tomorrow?" Susan asked looking at her daughters and step son, all of who were staring at their plates. And then at her husband who drank his beer in muted anger.

After a long pause Veronica lowered her fork wondering why it always had to be her. "I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who's gonna honestly answer yes."

"Yeah," Max agreed, her mouth full. "That's what happens when you're a nerd."

"Hey," she exclaimed turning to see Max grinning behind her hand.

"It's a good thing you're cute," Billy said and Neil stiffened beside him, "you'd never get a date."

The whole table seemed to be holding its breath waiting for the storm to break and Neil's voice to crack like thunder. But Veronica raised her glass to her mouth as though she didn't notice, as though her indifference was the only thing that could keep the storm at bay. "Whatever," she responded in a voice that sounded older than she looked, "there's more for me than just being someone's girlfriend." She took a gulp of water and set her glass down not needing to look at Billy to know she'd just hurt him.

"That there is," Neil agreed, his eyes heavy on her face. Always so heavy.

There wasn't much conversation after that, what with them having just gotten to Hawkins, what with Max having runaway less than a month ago, what with Billy being Billy and Neil being Neil and her mom being a shadow. And that just left Veronica, picking up everyone's pieces to keep this charade from falling apart.

Her and Max did the dishes while their mom and Neil talked softly in the living room, or rather Neil did the talking and she voiced her unnecessary agreement. "Veronica."

She looked up at her name, the only word to come out of his mouth gently. Drying her hands she met him by the door, her auburn brows

just slightly creased. His hand on her back made her blink too quick, breathe too sharp, swallow heavily - he didn't notice her flinch. But Billy did, he stood in the doorway to his room having heard her name and he watched a little too close to be considered casual. He knew what his dad's hands could do. She did too, even if Neil never raised them to her.

"Your mother and I wanted you to know how much we appreciate how good you've been with the move, helping us out and taking care of your sister," he said pulling the front door open and leading her outside. At the sight of the old truck her eyes lit up and the beginnings of a smile worked its way onto her mouth. "It's not exactly the one you've been saving up for."

"It's perfect," she said without hesitation. He expected no less and he looked down at her not quite smiling but pleased. The corners of her eyes were squinting from her wide grin as she looked up at him. "You really put up the other half?" she asked quietly, as though waiting for this to be taken away. Nothing good ever stayed.

But Neil nodded handing her the keys. Her truck looked massive next to Billy's Camero, it never ceased to amaze him how completely she overshadowed his son. Billy was seething as he returned to his room throwing the door shut behind him, grabbing the closest thing and breaking it in his hands. His dad always liked her, too much and more than Neil had ever liked him. Billy hated her so much sometimes. Even Max sulked gloomily having always known Veronica was his favorite, pretty perfect Veronica with her small hands and her big eyes. She was their mother's daughter, Max wasn't.

"Wanna go for a ride?"

Max looked up at Veronica's openly happy face and even though she wanted to hate Veronica too she rolled her eyes to hide her smile as she nodded. Veronica threw her arms around Neil's waist squeezing him tight, feeling his hand on her hair before she darted down the steps and to the driver's side. Max wasn't far behind her, and with a quick wave from Veronica to Neil she backed the truck out and they headed for the highway.

With the wind tearing at their sunlicked hair they belted every song

that came on before dissolving into a fit of giggles. Max and Veronica, Veronica and Max. Since the beginning of time, it's how it'd always been and how it was supposed to always be. She wished it never changed.

They were parked at an overpass lying in the bed of the truck watching the sky bleed as night slowly crept in. Max glared at the sunset like it wronged her. She didn't wanna be here, she didn't wanna start at a new school with new friends, she didn't wanna live with Neil or Billy, she wanted everything to be like before her dad left and it was never going to be.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Veronica's soft yet warm voice had Max sighing as she pressed closer to her side. "Do you really think everything's gonna be okay?" Max asked because that's what Veronica always said. And Max really didn't think so this time.

Veronica blinked at the faint stars too frail to twinkle yet, but they'd get there. They'd get there. "I think we'll make it okay," Veronica said turning her head to look at her sister's disbelieving face. "We always do." She raised her hand extending only her pinkie. "Together or nothing, right?"

"Right," Max repeated feeling a very small smile at the corners of her mouth as she hooked her pinky with Veronica's. And for the first time since their mom said Neil proposed Max actually thought it might be.

The two girls returned home still singing the song that'd been playing as they shut the door behind them. Max headed to their room but at not finding Veronica behind her she turned to see her kiss Neil's cheek with a sweet smile before she stood upright. Max saw the way that smile slipped off her face like it'd been wiped off with a rag, she ducked in their room before Veronica knew she'd seen. She thought Veronica was like any other simple preppy girl, too lost in her own privileged world to know how much the world really sucked. Max wondered if maybe she didn't know her sister as well as she thought she did.

Veronica showered and stood at their closet with her wet hair piled

on top of her head staring at the shirts she hung up earlier. Max already asked her why she couldn't just pick out her outfit tomorrow like a normal person, Veronica only shook her head needing something she could control.

There was a loud knock on their door, hard knuckles striking the wood making them both jump. "Night girls," Neil told them, his eyes trailing the oversized shirt Veronica wore finding it familiar. But she was in her room, that's what he'd come to see.

Max flipped through one of her comics laying on Veronica's bed, and like clockwork after twenty minutes Veronica moved to their door. "He's mad at you," Max reminded her, having seen his brief flash of hurt at the dinner table before an ugly sneer replaced it.

"I know," Veronica replied quietly before cracking the door and looking down the hall to see the light under their parents door was off. She snuck out of their room and closed their door the same time she opened Billy's and slipped inside.

He was sitting at the edge of his bed with his back to her rifling through one of the few boxes he had left. "Thought you were too good to be my girl," he scoffed huffing smoke through his nose. The bed dipped as she climbed onto it and he inhaled sharply feeling her settle against his back with her arms around his waist.

"I hate this," she breathed finally admitting it, and saying it out loud had her sighing as she wilted against him.

He'd seen through every lie and fake smile she plastered on for Susan and Neil and Max, but she couldn't lie with him. "I know." Stubbing out the cigarette he let his hand fall to her leg, soft and fleshy beneath his palm peeking out from beneath his shirt. He loved her in his shirts.

He turned and she raised her chin meeting him for an open mouthed kiss. He forced her back laying himself over her, his greedy hands making quick work of his pants before he was inside her. It'd been so long, they were starving.

They knew how to be quiet, how to not get caught, how to get so

close the bones of their hips ground together and all he had to do was twitch. Like he was trying to put back what had been taken from them. He had his face buried in his pillow and his hand clamped over her mouth, and with a choked groan he stilled between her legs.

He normally rolled off of her, reached for a cigarette, tried to coax her into saying it was good with an infuriating sly grin, on the really bad days he'd be mean and get as close to calling her a whore as he could without actually saying the word. He'd only ever called her that once, a year ago, and the way she pulled away from him with tears in her eyes he'd never say it again no matter how mad he was. But tonight, tonight he buried his face in her warm chest with his arms around her.

She wound her hand in his curly hair playing with it gently, feeling him grow steadily heavier as he relaxed against her. He wasn't like this often, she could count on one hand the times he'd been this soft with her. She could see at times he wanted to be, but he couldn't and it left her having to make up for it. This was her life now, a never ending obligation to make up for everyone else's shortcomings without room for her to be anything but perfect.

"I should go before we fall asleep," she said in a voice like a soft brush of wind.

He let her go and she sat up swinging her legs over the side of the bed. But she paused taking a breath and turned into him stealing a quick kiss, feeling the curve of his mouth against hers. He was almost smiling as she left, and she snuck back into her own room without a smile of her own. She wrapped her covers so tight around her she could barely breathe, needing something to hold her there so she didn't sink into the ground. Some days living was just too hard.

"It's pretty cool Neil helped you buy the truck," Max said in the dark. She barely heard Veronica's soft yeah. She never understood why Veronica wanted one, she was too small too delicate to control something that big. "Why are you his favorite?" she asked trying not to sound so bitter. Even their mother favored her, bought her dresses and did her hair - she was everything her mother wanted, what was left for Max.

"I'll tell you when you're older," was Veronica's quiet reply.

Max hated that answer and she hated more that it was coming from Veronica. "You think I wouldn't understand?" Max sneered not realizing how much she sounded like Billy.

She was quiet, so quiet Max almost thought she'd fallen asleep. But her voice cut through the darkness an airy strange thing that didn't really sound like her sister. "I don't want you to know that part of the world exists yet." She rolled over facing the window wondering how hard it'd be to fly from this, she'd tried several times but the same thing held her back every time - the wrist to whom her balloon was tied. "Night, Max."

Max stared at the shadow of Veronica's form curled in on itself, wondering how she hadn't noticed before how heavy the world Veronica carried was. "Night", Max said in return, and it didn't feel like enough.

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Her bed was empty when Max woke and she shot up looking around their small room for any sign of her. All she found was Veronica's neatly made bed and missing book bag. Glancing at the hall she saw her standing in the doorway to Billy's room and Max rolled her eyes shutting their door so she could get dressed.

He was standing at the mirror fixing his hair, and as if knowing his eyes shifted left seeing Veronica leaning against the doorframe watching him. "Like what you see?" he asked with a smug grin, his tongue snaking out to lick his lips.

Glancing behind her she stepped into his room making her way to where he stood, the top of her head reaching no more than an inch above his shoulders. He grunted at the sting of her hands on his ass and leaned against her chuckling darkly. "I need you to drive Max."

His smile was gone in a flash and his eyes narrowed as he glared at her in the mirror. She knew how to get what she wanted, she could use people like they were only there to be of service to her. She was a real bitch sometimes, and god did he love her. "What's in it for me?"

he asked making it clear he wasn't giving her anything for free.

A smirk curled half her mouth as she stepped back, hearing Neil still in the kitchen as he got ready to leave. They both knew how easy it'd be for Veronica to get Neil to ask Billy to drive Max. It was a good thing she loved him too. "We have the same lunch period, I'll make it up to you." She had her shoes on and her keys in her pocket, she was leaving and he was driving Max there was no other way around it.

"And what are you gonna do?" he demanded like he had any say in this. She had all the power here, what's worse is he'd given it to her without realizing it until it was too late.

She was aware of this too, she knew it was why he could be so mean. "Whatever you want," she answered seeing the smile that slid across his mouth like a knife through butter. His mind was so far down the gutter he forgot he never really had a choice. But it got her what she needed and it made him happy enough he'd probably let her enjoy it too. He was out of her mind as she entered the kitchen to grab a banana to take with her.

"You're leaving early," Neil casually remarked with just enough of an edge she knew he wanted a reason.

She shouldered her bag and looked up at him with a smile ready. "I wanted to get my schedule and go over the programs and extracurriculars they offer."

She was an overachiever, always had been, she wanted the world and she knew how to get what she wanted. He hadn't been sure of her at first, didn't care for her severe ambition, but she worked hard and was so sweet it made his teeth ache. So he nodded and told her, "two."

She had four extracurriculars and a part time job on top of being class president when she left California. Her wide eyes narrowed slightly as she studied his stoic face, finding the subtle fondness for her in his stern jaw. "Two, and if I find a third I'll bring it to you to discuss." She was toeing a very thin line with a short-fused man. But she was agreeing to his terms while making it clear she wanted more, with the added cushioning of clear respect. She would've made such a

good class president, and it would've looked so good on applications.

As she knew he liked that she wasn't going to do anything without his okay, she had a way of making him feel like the most important man in her life. "Deal," he said holding his hand out for her to shake on it.

She fit her smaller hand in his and shook firm and brisk, like a man. But she stepped forward rising on tiptoes and kissed his cheek before she marched out of the house with purpose heavy in her step.

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Billy had her on her stomach in the back of his car, his hand fisting her hair and his teeth buried in her shoulder hard enough it'd bruise. She waited for him to finish lost in too many thoughts to care about enjoying this.

He was catching his breath as she sat up pulling her skirt down and then set about fixing her hair. Her face wasn't flushed, her breathing wasn't ragged, nothing about her was bothered. "Could you at least try to pretend you wanted that?"

Her fingers stilled in brushing out the knots he'd put in her hair and she took a steadying breath. The honest answer was not anymore than he pretended to care if she enjoyed it, but that wasn't fair and it'd only make him angry, and she still needed him. So she smiled. "That wasn't for me," she said leaning into him for a warm kiss.

She had soft full lips and when she kissed him like this it felt like lying down after a really long day. He exhaled in a short huff through his nose as he got a hand around the back of her neck: not often but more often than sometimes he had to knock her down a few pegs. "What do you want now?"

He used to fall for that so easily, just the curl of her mouth wrapped him around her finger. But Neil was getting worse and Billy was getting harder, and she wouldn't be able to do this forever. "Drive Max home," she told him. It wasn't a request.

His hand tightened on her neck, his thumb along her jaw, just enough for her to think of choking. "And if I say no?" They were so close he

saw her eyes turn to stone, he knew her first thought but she loved him too much to go there.

She took another breath. "I wonder what Neil would say." His face broke open showing a terrible pain but it closed just as fast and filled with rage. She'd already climbed over the seat and was getting out by then. She shouldn't have said that, nothing he did would ever make her do that to him. But she turned to him as he stood over her glowering. "You know I have an interview. We talked about this, the moment I graduate I'm getting her out of that house. You can either do this with me or I will do it without you." Her eyes might've been wide and her voice soft but there was a quiet strength about her that wouldn't yield to him. "I want you with me, Billy," she really thought she did and she could see in his suddenly vulnerable eyes he did too, "but I'm not gonna wait forever for you to decide."

There was nothing else for them to say and if they continued now they'd only hurt each other. And they were already hurting. So she walked away hearing the door slam shut like a clap of thunder. Her eyes closed as though to flinch but her steps didn't falter, she didn't turn back.

2. I'd fight for you, if you'd fight for me

Veronica's third thing was the job. She knew Neil would be opposed, he hadn't liked that she had her old job. So she came ready with a plan: her interview at the music store went well they wanted to hire her, it was next door to the arcade so she could pick Max up two or three days a week and Max could do her homework in the back room before playing games til Veronica was done in time to drive them home for dinner, and on the weekends Max could come for a few hours. It worked.

"So let me get this straight," Neil said standing with a hand flat on the counter as he hovered over her while she and Max did the dishes, "you decided to get a job and then tell me about it?"

"A job offer," she clarified gently, the calm to his quick rising anger. "I didn't wanna bug you if they didn't even want me." She said it with a shrug like she thought she wouldn't have been good enough. "But I have a smaller workload, I can take Max more and Billy even agreed to drive her the other days."

Neil's brow shot up. "Is that right?" he asked turning to his son who hovered in the background having known his dad would be pissed.

Veronica hit Billy with that request when she got home and he asked her how it went. He immediately asked what was in it for him, he'd wanted to smack the look she gave him off her face when she reminded him it was a music store. But he did what she told him to do so Neil wouldn't be angry at both of them. "Yeah, whatever. You said I needed to start helping out more." The whatever had been his and she rolled her eyes hating his attitude.

Neil looked between them silently before nodding, his jaw just barely relaxing. "Good," he said looking first to his son then to Veronica. He raised a finger at her. "One slip up and you quit," he warned her. He saw the breath she took, the shifting of her lips to open her mouth and speak, and he tapped the tip of his finger on the point of her nose. "Nonnegotiable."

She paused a moment too long at that before smiling faintly. "You

know me well," she said knowing not to push it. She held her hand out to him without a fight.

He shook her hand and pulled her to him kissing the top of her head, smelling her shampoo, before he pulled away. "Go finish your homework," he told her knowing she wouldn't have had the time to finish it yet.

She nodded and turned to her and Max's room, surprised at how easily he swallowed that. He'd use it against her eventually, but she could deal with that when it happened. Her eyes glanced at Billy's closed door knowing he was probably furious, he hated how much his dad liked her. That's what she needed to deal with, making sure he didn't screw this up for her.

Veronica and Max sat on her bed with their homework between them. Veronica scribbled furiously but Max was looking at her soft girly features finding little parts of herself in her sister's face. "It's cool you work at a music store," she said honestly thinking it was.

With her eyes still on her paper Veronica nodded. "I already asked, the owner said you come in as much as you want. He's got an old record player, said you can pick the music."

"That sounds awesome," Max replied with an almost excited grin. "How many records does he have?"

She had more work than she had time to finish it, now with the job she'd have to work harder. Already she was gonna have to stay up late to catch up what she'd missed in all of her honors classes. She didn't have time for this. But still her eyes left the page as she turned to Max, who for the first time in many months looked like herself, and she set the book aside.

They talked well into the night, Max told her about the boys she caught following her, they talked about school and the town, music and more boys, they even talked about Billy. Sometimes Veronica's voice would get so warm and her eyes so bright when she talked about him, that hadn't happened in a while.

Max was asleep Billy was on his way and their parents had turned in

a while before, but Veronica sat at the table with heavy eyes trying to get everything done. The light under his door was keeping him up, not because it was in his eyes or even bothering him in any way, but because he knew she was up. And because he knew her he knew she wouldn't stop until her body gave up.

With an irritable huff Billy threw his covers off and pulled open the door seeing her with her long hair hanging over her shoulder like a curtain hiding her face. He sat down at the head of the table, in Neil's spot, and set his carton of Marlboros on the table flicking his lighter open. With the cigarette perched between his lips he told her, "you've got til I finish."

She blinked at him with eyes half glazed over. "I have to finish this, I'm fine," she was stubborn enough to argue.

"You're fine as hell," he mumbled taking a drag. She was so tired she didn't even notice, he himself was tired enough if he closed his eyes he didn't think they'd open.

She made it about half the stick before her head fell just a little. Even though she jerked awake and sat up he still stubbed out the cigarette and threw it away. Her eyes closed a little too long and when they opened he'd shut the book and she sighed almost relieved. Getting an arm around her back and the other under her knees he scooped her up and carried her down the hall. He wasn't even thinking as he turned left for his room and pushed the door closed with his foot. Standing over the bed he set her down and just about fell on top of her. Her arms around his shoulders had him releasing a long heavy breath as he settled against her chest. And it felt like coming home, after being gone too long.

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At some point in the night Veronica rolled onto her side and brought Billy with her cradling him against her, his forehead against her cheek. Neil was in the kitchen sipping from the thermos Susan had filled with coffee, glancing at his watch wondering where Veronica was.

Max's hand gripped Veronica's arm too tight as she shook her awake.

"Christ, what," Billy groaned not yet ready to leave their warm and quiet peace.

But Veronica shoved him off her as she tore out of his room and lunged into the bathroom. She made quick work of getting ready and in under ten minutes was heading to the kitchen looking almost normal.

"Late night?" Neil asked catching the bags under her youthful eyes. Her books on the table, the cigarette butt in the trash, he could put the pieces together.

She knew better than to ever lie to this man, if he was asking it meant he knew part of the answer. "Yeah, Billy and I were talking about him driving Max to the arcade today and me driving her home."

His eyes narrowed studying her face, not quite buying it. He'd never buy it after what happened in California. But she looked honest, and she'd only ever been honest with him so he nodded. "Glad you two are working this out," he said reaching a hand to the top of her head as he passed her on his way to the door.

She didn't breathe until she heard his tires scrape the asphalt as he backed onto the street. "You know better," Susan said smoothing back Veronica's hastily braided hair.

"I know."

"After what happened last time he won't be so forgiving," Susan reminded her as if Veronica would ever forget. As if she could. "I don't want you to have to go through that again." Her knuckles brushed Veronica's cheek and she leaned into her mother's touch.

There was an ache buried so deep sometimes she couldn't breathe, a sense of something missing that took over her so completely it was like the doctor had taken out a part of her with it.

She looked up at her mother's gentle face filled with so much sympathy it made her stomach churn. "I know," Veronica said again more to get out of this conversation than any real agreement. "I

should go, I still have some work to do." With a quick hug Veronica turned for the door catching Billy in the hall coming out of the bathroom. He saw the flash of pain on her face before she was outside, he felt that pain buried deep in his chest hearing his dad's seething voice saying it was his fault.

...

There was only enough room in her bag to carry two periods worth of books and folders, so between second and third period she was at her locker exchanging textbooks. A boy with shaggy hair she had almost every class with called her name as he stopped beside her with a wide smile, having tried yesterday and today to talk to her. She always found a reason to be busy, she didn't have time for friends.

So she looked up at where he stood on her left with an excuse ready. But his eyes moved beyond her and he swallowed heavily before stepping back. "Catch you later," he said with a nervous smile and turned on his heel.

A wry smirk curled half her mouth as she pushed the locker door open so that it laid flat against the door beside her. Billy moved closer raising an arm to lean against the locker just close enough for her to feel him. "There's a party tonight," he stated with enough of an edge to make it clear she was going with him.

"I have work," she told him. He was in a mood, it wouldn't take much today to set him off. She was really starting to hate his moods, she was starting to hate him too. And herself, sometimes.

She shut her locker but he slid in front of her not giving her a way out of this. "Look," he said waiting til her sharp green eyes were on his, "I heard what Susan said this morning. Let's have some fun, Ronnie, go to this stupid party with me."

It felt like forever since they had any fun, she almost couldn't remember. And her own mood was so cloudy she was desperate for a little light. But she couldn't be that simple, so she opened her mouth with a request on her tongue.

His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb dragging over her lips to silence her. "I'll drive Max," he told her before she could ask. Her eyes brightened in a way they hadn't the last few months, she looked like his Ronnie again. He pressed a firm kiss to her forehead before slinging an arm around her shoulders. And it was like old times, when they used to be happy.

...

If Veronica ever heard monster mash again it'd be too soon. She dropped her bag by the foot of her bed having finished most of her work at lunch, between classes, and behind the register at the record store. "What happened?" Veronica asked seeing Max's scowl.

Max didn't make it a full sentence before Veronica stormed into Billy's room slamming the door behind her. She didn't think she'd ever heard her sister yell the way she did now, Billy's voice was a deep bark but hers rose high over his in a wave of fury – "you don't get to talk!"

She was livid plain and simple, he was lucky she was able retain herself enough not to hit him because she really wanted to hit him. "You scared the shit out of her, threatened to run over a couple kids. You better have a damn good reason. What was it, Billy?"

"Oh now I'm allowed to talk?" he spit through grit teeth. A shadow darkened her face and for a moment she looked like Neil seconds before his arm drew back, he almost flinched.

Veronica took a breath letting that ugly thought go. "Don't worry about driving her anymore, does that work for you?" She could feel the sneer contorting her face and she hated it, she hated him. How quick everything turned to shit.

He was left staring at his door after she closed it, quiet this time. His boot struck his dresser and somewhere the wood cracked. This wasn't Max's fault, he could try to pretend that all he wanted it didn't make it any easier than it was true. It was Veronica's fault too and he was getting tired of everyone acting like it was just his.

Veronica closed the door to their room and sighed leaning against it

for a moment before she sat beside Max on her bed. If she asked more about it she'd start yelling again, so she settled for something slightly easier. "Were they your stalkers?"

Max was still a little stunned, a little scared - Billy was one of the worst people she knew and somehow her sister scared even him. "Yeah," she said with a shrug. "They asked me to go trick or treating with them."

She might've grumbled that part but Veronica saw through it. "Any of them cute?" she asked hearing Max just about choke.

"What, gross, I'm not answering that." Her brows were knitted and her nose curled like just the thought of it offended her.

But Veronica smiled looking at her faintly blushing sister. "Guess I'm gonna have to make up my own answer."

Max turned to her sharply. "No," she told her not liking when Veronica made her own answers. "The answer's no." But Veronica's smile was growing.

"You see, my answer was yes and I'm always right." Beside her Max groaned dramatically flushing brighter. Now she was ready to ask, "what time did they tell you?"

Her arms were crossed across her chest sharing Veronica's stubbornness. "Seven," she muttered without looking at her. "I'm not going," she told her as Veronica climbed off the bed and stood at the closet.

Veronica rifled through her own things finding the black shirt and pants she'd worn last Halloween and threw them on the bed. Then she grabbed Max's costume. "In ten minutes he's gonna barge in demanding I go to this party. I'm either going with him or I'm going with you and I will make sure we run into your stalkers. And I have every intention of embarrassing you."

Heaving a childish sigh Max threw herself off the bed and rifled through a box looking for her mask. A very small smile curled just the corners of Veronica's mouth as she got dressed thinking maybe,

just maybe, Max might get to like it here.

Max sat on the edge of Veronica's bed watching her stand at the mirror fixing her makeup, finding it harder today to see any part of her in Veronica's face. Veronica's stare flicked to the right catching Max's eye in the mirror. "Want me to doll you up?" she offered already knowing the answer was no. And Max did her part in rolling her eyes, but she thought about it for a quick second before shaking that thought out of her head.

"Mike Meyers didn't wear makeup," she informed her sounding meaner than she meant to.

But Veronica didn't seem to notice as she finished putting on red lipstick and set about pulling her hair into a smooth high ponytail. Twenty three seconds past ten minutes their door was thrown open where it slammed into the wall making Max jump. Veronica's expression was bland as she turned to Billy, whose fury melted at the sight of her in those tight black pants and shirt with the sleeves that hung off her shoulders. The first time he convinced her to wear that was two Halloween's ago and it took his breath away now the same way it had then. "Let's go, I'm not waiting on you," is what came out of his mouth. It's not what he meant to say.

Already regretting this Veronica pulled on her pumps and looked to Max. "Have fun," she said with a quick smile that fell the moment she turned away. They met their parents on the front stop who were coming in the same time they were leaving.

Neil looked Veronica over with a frown not liking how tight it was on her, he could taste the word whore on his tongue. But she quieted it with a sweet grin and a kiss to his cheek. "Be back before curfew," he told them knowing with Veronica there really was no need.

The unhappy pair drove in thick silence, the kind that was loud and separating. Her eyes were glassy, her breaking heart was swelling behind them. "There's no point holding onto this anymore, neither of us want it." She was doing this without him.

He parked on the crowded street hearing the music and the wild youthful voices coming from Tina's house. Clearing the lump from his

throat he cut the engine and told her, "bout damn time."

They were both frowning as they climbed out of the car, the tie that bound the two together finally breaking. A rough voice called Billy's name and he shrugged her off like a jacket he was too warm to need. And she slipped through writhing half drunk bodies like a ghost needing something to tie her down. She dipped a cup in the spiked punchbowl and gulped it down before she filled her cup again.

"Rough night?"

She turned at the soft mannered voice to find the same boy from before, only his dark hair that normally hung over his eyes was slicked back. "I've had worse nights," she said with a shrug, doing what she always did and tried to make everything better. "Your name's Larry, right?"

"Louis," he corrected with a small smile, his eyes falling from hers to her cup. He shook his head at her soft apology. "First time's free, the second one I will be offended by."

"There won't be a second time."

His smile was bigger this time, his eyes darting between hers nervously. "I know. You look really nice tonight," he tried to say it clearly but it got a little jumbled at the end. It made her smile, flattered though she was already trying to find a way to let him down easy. "Can I offer you a nonalcoholic beverage?"

She looked down at her cup seeing she'd already gone through half of it, and even though she wasn't interested the way she knew he was interested in her she really missed having a friend. "What are you offering?" she asked glancing at the counter to see an array of bottles.

"It's a concoction my little brother invented," he told her putting her at ease as she thought of Max. "I can't promise you'll like it but I can guarantee you haven't had it before. No peeking."

She chuckled faintly to herself as she turned away and set her cup on the counter. Her eyes found Billy across the room, a cigarette perched in the corner of his scowling mouth. But a hand hit his shoulder

ushering him outside to the keg and she turned back to Louis. He handed her the less than full cup and watched her sip it, his mouth a straight line.

He'd mixed several sodas and maybe fruit punch, and it left a bitter aftertaste. "It's not the worst thing I've had," she said and he let out a breath of a laugh.

"Maybe a little alcohol right?" he said pouring a little from the cup she'd set down. They talked for a while in their corner of the kitchen, she asked him about his brother and he stuttered an answer. She mentioned her sister and he nodded because he'd seen the two of them together. There was a loud whoop and he watched her turn to where Billy was with a small group gathered around him, already making a name for himself. Louis had seen her with him too, yesterday in the parking lot, what they'd done in the back of his car.

She grew steadily heavier until all at once the world seemed to turn on its side and she leaned against the counter. She hadn't drunk enough for this. "I have to go to the bathroom," she tried to say but her tongue felt weird and cottony. She turned and the world turned with it, and it never stopped.

With a hand on the wall she stumbled to the hall feeling a hand on her back guiding her to the bathroom. "You don't look so good," Louis said, his voice sounding far away as he closed the door behind them. His hands gently pushed her down and she found herself lying on a bed. This wasn't what she wanted.

In the crowded living room Billy glowered at the closed door downing what was left in his cup before turning to the almost pretty girl cuddled up to his side. She was an easy lay, it's what he'd been looking for. Now he was thinking of some asshole's hands on his girl. He did his best to focus on her but his eyes kept sliding back to that damn door, and the more he drank the hotter his blood boiled.

He shoved her aside and stalked down the hall to the bedroom. Veronica was his and he didn't share, he'd make sure she didn't forget that. The lock turned in his hand and a hot breath left his nose wondering if she wanted him to walk in on her, to see she really didn't need him. God she was such a bitch. He opened the door

quietly, not planning to give this jackass time to fight back before he tore him a new one for ever thinking he could touch her.

"Hey, shh, it's okay," Louis said, his breath hot on her face as his hands pawed at her chest. There was no strength in her arms as she tried to push him away, her mouth refusing to open as tears leaked out of the corner of her eyes. He shushed her again as he reached for his belt.

"Get the fuck off her."

Louis jumped up with his hands raised. "We're just drunk," he said before he realized he was saying it to Billy. He didn't hold onto that thought long before he was thrown into the wall.

In a blind rage Billy had him on the ground throwing punch after punch, feeling his nose bend under his fist, his front teeth crack against his knuckles. He didn't know if the blood dripping from his hands was his or the shit bag strewn across the floor. He could've killed him.

He stood over the bed looking down at where she laid drugged and unassuming, mascara smudged at the corners of her eyes from crying. God he could've killed him. The moment he touched her she pushed against him, a whimper sounding in the back of her throat. The sound of that all but wrecked him. "It's me," he told her as gentle as he was capable. "Baby it's me."

His voice had her stilling as she blinked up at him, only able to see the blue of his eyes. Her lips barely moved as she breathed, "Billy?"

"I got you," he swore to her, his forehead over hers and his hands cupping her face drying her tears. The breath went out of her and he watched her eyes close feeling her relax beneath him, finally safe.

With her cradled in his arms he walked her out into the hall and through the living room. "She's can't hold her beer," he said hearing several loud laughs. They set his teeth on edge as he carried her outside to the car.

Neil was sitting in his arm chair with a beer in hand watching the

news, Susan on the couch working on a needlepoint trying to keep her hands busy, and Max was in their room sorting her candy and putting aside the ones she knew Veronica liked best. Neil looked up at the door being kicked open and he was on his feet at the sight of his son carrying his limp daughter. "What the hell happened?" his voice boomed and the windows seemed to shake. "Was she drinking?"

"Neil," Susan said too soft to hear, not daring to try to hold him back.

Without answering Billy carried her to her bed hearing his dad swearing behind him, knowing somehow this would end up being his fault. He set her down and pulled the covers over before Neil got his hands around his jacket and threw him against the bookshelf finally having enough. "I asked you a question." His voice was low, that's when it was most dangerous. Not even Max said anything as she sat with wide worried eyes, she didn't move, didn't even breathe.

This time Billy answered. "Someone slipped something in her drink, I took care of it."

Neil processed that still in Billy's face seething, their noses close enough to touch, his shirt balled in angry fists. "Show me your hands." He looked at his son's red knuckles and nodded. "You teach him a lesson?"

"Yes sir."

His eyes were hard as stone as he stared Billy down, but he released a hot breath before letting him go clapping his arm; not noticing the way Billy flinched. "Good man," he said, but his eyes had already moved to Veronica.

Feeling dismissed Billy went to his room thinking for one terrible moment he should've just left her there. He regretted that thought immediately, he hated himself for it. It was late, the kind of late that was really morning, when the bed dipped under her weight. He rolled over catching her in his arms and held her tight. If he had a choice he'd never let her go.

3. kiss this dead girl walking

She woke with a blinding headache. She could feel the morning light in the back of her eyes, Billy's snoring was deafening, the taste of her mouth was making her stomach turn. Stumbling into the bathroom she first threw up and then stood over the sink with her head in her hands before finally convincing herself to get ready.

Her mother's hand was soft in her hair and she turned to see she'd brought aspirin. Seeing her mom had a wave of tears welling in her eyes that she was quick to blink away, holding her mom off before she could hug her because she knew they'd never stop. She found Neil in the kitchen still sipping his coffee having waited, and she wanted to appreciate it more but her head still hurt and she hated how small she felt.

"Billy will drive you to school," Neil told her and Billy as he came out of his room ready to leave.

Veronica sighed the same time Billy shook his head. "I can't drive her to work after, I've," he swallowed glancing at Veronica's pale face and feeling heat rise in his as his eyes fell, "I have a date."

Neil's jaw ground as his eyes hardened prepared to tell him he had to, but Veronica beat him to it still having to be the mediator. "If I don't do it now I never will," she said hugging him quickly. She grabbed her book bag and her sister and headed out not waiting for either Billy or Neil.

It wasn't much of a drive and for most of it Veronica honestly, heavily, considered asking Max if she wanted to skip. "I didn't get to ask how last night was," Veronica said instead.

"Fine," Max shrugged watching her closely. After Neil left their room last night Max shook Veronica's shoulder to ask what happened, it'd scared her that she didn't wake up. "What happened last night?" From the look that crossed Veronica's face Max knew what she was gonna say. "Don't say you'll tell me when I'm older."

Veronica released a heavy breath as she pulled into the school

parking lot, and she sat for a moment with the truck off trying to remember how much she knew at thirteen. "Someone tried to hurt me," is what she decided on, and even that she could barely get out. "Billy stopped him, that's all that happened."

There was something strange about her voice, like it was being stretched too thin and would break any second. So Max hugged her feeling the stuttering breath she took. "I'll see you after work," Max told her because she didn't know what else to say.

But Veronica turned to her with a quaint smile. "Go see your stalkers," she teased making Max roll her eyes as a blush crept up the back of her neck. With a wave the girls headed in different directions, and Veronica squared her shoulders ready to pretend everything was fine and that she was fine. She'd pretend so hard she'd make it true.

And she did. By the time she showed up at work she'd gotten the bad taste out of her mouth, her headache was mild, and her hands had stopped shaking. She could be fine. The guy who owned the store left no more than ten minutes after she got there, he had a date of his own though he'd been married to his for twenty years. She didn't mind because she was fine, and the store wasn't busy because it was Wednesday and he told her this was one of his slowest days.

She was finishing her homework behind the register when the bell above the door rang for the first time in the hour she'd been there. With a sigh she looked up from the paragraph she'd been reading ready to plaster on a smile and ask if they needed help. "Thought you had a date," she said as Billy made his way to her.

"I blew it off," he shrugged like it wasn't a big deal.

She nodded not letting that cloud her mind, because sometimes he made her so short sighted she didn't see anything but him. "Like you blew off Max?"

"She was late," he snapped still irritated about that. But he huffed coming around to her side of the register. "I know I screwed up yesterday, I'll make it up to you." He glanced at her expressionless face and sighed harder. "I'll make it up to her too."

She blinked at him a few moments longer before she jerked her chin at the record player. "Find us something to listen to," she told him with a small grin. She watched him flip through the different albums trying to tell herself this feeling wasn't going to last, eventually they'd go home back to reality where they couldn't be together and she had to be a sister that couldn't depend on him. But in that moment she didn't think about what she needed, she let herself have what she wanted.

Out of everything he could've stumbled on in the rows of boxes, he somehow found the first song they ever danced to. He made his way to where she sat on a stool behind the register and settled at her back wrapping his arms around her chest. She sighed leaning against him feeling him press a kiss to her shoulder.

The voice crooning out of the gramophone sang sickly sweet words about love, the kind that was supposed to make a person's heart feel full. "This is the worst song," she mumbled with her eyes closed.

"Yeah it really does suck," he agreed before pulling her out of the chair and up into his arms. She laughed as he walked her to the middle of the store and set her down, grabbing her hand and spinning her around to face him. They came together with her arms around his shoulders and his hands around her back, his head bowed to her upturned face as they gently swayed together.

As the music swelled near the end he turned dipping her, a hand cradling the back of her neck as he looked down at her warm eyes. He brought her back up pulling her in for a kiss, not needy or desperate or laced with bitter hatred, in that moment all they were was in love.

The bell above the door rang breaking them out of their reverie as he pulled away, and he watched her return to the register as if she never expected him to stay. It was a group of kids they went to school with, she didn't know any of them nor did she think they were in the same grade. There was movement in her peripheral and she turned seeing Billy at her side.

He bent to kiss her cheek, and he held her there soaking in that soft moment feeling like they could be just two kids in love. "See you at

home," he told her, his hand under her chin knocking it lightly. A sly smile curled half his mouth at the way she pressed her lips together to hide her own, he almost kissed her again. But he left, hips swinging feeling her eyes on them, not noticing the parked car several rows down.

A little over an hour and only a handful more customers she cut the lights and locked up for the night heading for her truck. It sputtered loudly without catching and she paused feeling dread settling in her stomach as she turned the key again. "Shit," she muttered throwing the door open and climbing back out.

It was already dark and she didn't have a flashlight, Neil would have to look at it later. Fumbling with her keys she turned back for the store so she could use the phone to call home. "Something wrong?"

Her heart stuttered at that voice and she clenched her keys tighter as she turned around. The whole world fell out from beneath her feet seeing Louis' battered face and dark eyes as he leaned against her truck. And several hundred feet behind him the shadow of something darker waited.

...

Their fractured family sat in heavy silence as everyone snuck glances at Veronica's empty chair. She was never late. "Where the hell is she?" Neil muttered feeling the heat in his blood rising as he looked at his watch. This was about to be her one slip up if she didn't get here soon.

Billy gulped his water but it did little for his dry mouth. She'd been fine when he left her, almost happy even. Hell he'd been planning to sneak her out later to lay under the stars, because she liked that sort of thing and it'd end with him being laid. But his stomach was in knots, something in the back of his mind knowing this was wrong.

Susan cleared their plates while Neil pulled on his jacket and grabbed his keys. "Can I go with you?" Max asked with her shoes already on. Her sister was never late for anything, she wanted to tell Veronica about the slimy thing Dustin had found and about how mean Mike was. Now she was worried.

"Not this time," Neil said with a hand on the top of her head. "Go finish your homework."

She watched him leave with a deep frown. "I already did," she mumbled feeling her mother come up beside her trying to assure her Veronica was fine. She just had to stay late, there was a misunderstanding. But this just really wasn't like Veronica.

Her truck sat alone and proud in the dark parking lot in front of the closed store. Neil still got out to try the door; her truck was unlocked with no sign of her and the store was locked and pitch black. His hands curled into fists not knowing what else to do with them. In turning back to his car he caught the gleam of metal on the ground and time stopped with him as he understood he was seeing her keys.

It was late when Neil got back home, the neighborhood was dark and asleep except for their house. Susan sat on the couch with a hand pressed to her shivering mouth, Max was pretending to be asleep, and Billy was sitting on the edge of bed waiting. He was on his feet the moment the door opened and he hovered in the hall hearing Max crack her own door open and peek her head out.

"Did they find her, is she okay?" Susan asked knowing from Veronica not being there and it now being so late that nothing was okay. She was begging.

He got his hands around her arms as a means of comfort, not having the patience to deal with this. "We don't know anything yet," he told her only what he thought she could handle. After finally understanding she hadn't been in this town long enough to run away with anyone the police were left with a missing girl, it didn't bode well. "Go to bed," he said to his son sounding harsh and unforgiving.

None of them slept that night, waiting for the door to open and Veronica to come in smiling. Max found her way to the living room where she sat against her mother's side wishing it was Veronica. Billy snuck into their room looking for the small box Veronica kept hidden, looking for the few grainy pictures she had of them together trying to convince himself she hadn't left him.

It was school as usual when morning finally dragged its way to them,

Neil grabbing Billy's arm telling him to look out for Max today. It left him in a bad mood, the kind where his blue eyes shifted dangerously looking for a fight with anyone. With everyone. He hated her that day.

...

It hadn't been a good night, hadn't been a particularly good morning either and the day was getting worse. Hopper stood in the morgue over the cold broken body of a girl too young for what'd been done to her.

He knew the kid heard the call come in last night, she'd locked herself in her room but she had to have heard. And even though he told her not to try to look for the missing teen he had a feeling she did anyways. What he didn't know is that El hadn't been able to find even a small part of her, as if something dark and consuming was hiding her.

"Any identifying marks? I've got a worried father," Hopper explained running calloused fingers along the brim of his hat as he held it in angry hands finding it hard to look at her.

The examiner lifted her arm to show him the tattoo over the side of her rib cage.

Neil didn't know Veronica had a tattoo but he knew Billy did, a skull smoking a cigarette. He didn't say anything to Susan only that he'd be a while, and the moment the door closed behind him she collapsed in a fit of tears.

They cleaned her up as best they could, her hair laid strangely over the right side of her skull seeming to fall almost inside of it, a white sheet was pulled up to her shoulder to cover her. But Neil could see the mangled stapled skin where they'd cut into her to do an autopsy. Full lips and high cheekbones, that fairytale face. He remained stoic but the muscles in his jaw bulged and his nostrils flared; silent grief.

Hopper's eyes closed having really hoped it wasn't gonna be his kid. The examiner pulled the sheet over her face and Neil charged from the room to try to catch his breath. He squared his shoulders and

turned to the chief ready to get what was needed done.

About an hour into questioning and explaining what would happen from here Hopper was interrupted by the shaken examiner who led him back to the morgue, where all that was left of Veronica Mayfield was the crumpled sheet that'd been covering her. "What the hell?" Hopper muttered wondering what he was supposed to tell her father.

...

Neil didn't get home til half an hour to dinner. Susan wouldn't have made anything, she probably wouldn't for a while this was gonna break her heart. So it surprised him first to see Veronica's truck in the driveway and then to open the door to the smell of dinner, the table made and Susan humming with a faint smile.

"You can be angry tomorrow," she was relieved enough to tell him as she met him at the door. He stared down at her with confusion shining in his red eyes. "She said a friend picked her up because the truck wouldn't start and she ended up spending the night. She knows she messed up, but she's okay. She's home."

"What the hell are you talking about?" A door opening had him looking up to see Veronica coming out of her and Max's room with Max glued to her side. He stepped back reeling, his eyes wide enough they could've fallen out of his skull. That fairytale face.

She smiled gently and walked to him on stiff legs. "I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to worry you."

He was stock still as she hugged him, feeling her body's warmth through his shirt. She'd taken a shower but there was still a very faint scent of dirt. "We can discuss this tomorrow," he said in a voice that almost shook. Her eyes flicked to his shell shocked stare, he didn't remember them being so dark. A smile slid across her mouth and all at once he knew this wasn't his daughter. Not that she'd ever really been that to him.

It was a quiet dinner, Billy came later than he was supposed to and heaved a heavy breath at the door seeing Veronica was there. But Neil didn't yell, he wouldn't take his eyes off her as she picked

through her food. No one was mentioning where Veronica had been and why she wasn't in trouble, even Max knew something was wrong.

The two girls washed the dishes together, Susan came by to kiss Veronica's cheek before she sat on the couch not caring to notice the strangeness of it all. Max went to their room afterwards ready to talk, she had so many questions. But Veronica shut herself in the bathroom with the water running.

She threw up everything she'd eaten, mushed up food and chunks of things she wouldn't look at. She'd been throwing up since she got home, but that had all been blood and a little bit of an ear. She crawled back into the shower and sat under the cold spray clutching her knees to her scarred chest as her body wracked with her terrible sobbing. His skin was still under her nails from where she clawed at him, screaming for him to stop. He didn't, he didn't stop until he caved her skull in.

She hugged her legs tighter turning her face into the wall, trying to forget that awful second of feeling the wind on her brain before she finally died. It'd hurt so much.

But there was shit to do and shit to figure out, and everything was just such shit. Taking a shaky breath deeper than the others she pulled it all back in and washed her face. Turning off the shower she stood dripping on the tile in front of the mirror, reaching trembling fingers to the stapled skin not understanding what the hell was going on. What was wrong with her?

A knock on the door had her jumping with a hand over her racing heart, she could hear it pounding it was so loud. She wrapped a towel tight around herself and opened it to see Billy waiting with a hand on the frame and suspicion in his eyes. "Later," she told him softly and slid under his arm to go to her room. She kept her back to Max as she got dressed, not knowing there were still bruises littering her body.

"You're not okay," Max whispered as Veronica sat beside her in a long sleeve shirt and pants. Without turning Veronica shook her head and Max leaned against her side wishing she could make it better.

Their mother bid them goodnight, smiling gently at where Veronica

sat running a hand through Max's hair as she slept against her side. Neil stood in the hall watching her closely, and in that normal sweet moment he almost thought he'd been mistaken.

Veronica looked down at Max's innocent face hearing her parent's door shut and Neil's quiet voice as he asked Susan what all Veronica said when she came home. She shouldn't be able to hear them, the same way she shouldn't be able to feel each heartbeat or if she was still enough feel her blood swimming through her veins.

When the house had fallen quiet, the kind that grated on her ears, she snuck into Billy's room laying her head over his chest. He reached a hand to brush her hair back. "You scared the shit out of me," he mumbled against her forehead.

She didn't have an answer for him, at least not one that made any sense. So she picked something she knew with absolute certainty. "I need your help."

"Jesus, what now?" he demanded pulling away, she was always needing something.

But her arm encircled his waist tightening to the point it almost hurt and he couldn't move. She could break him, that thought came out of nowhere and it scared her. "Getting rid of a body," she answered on a soft breath.

He sat up pulling her with him, his hand a tight fist in her hair pulling her head back to look at her. Her eyes looked black in his dark room, her face the kind of calm he knew meant she was serious.

They climbed out of his window and he got behind the wheel of his car taking it out of park so they could roll it to the street before he started the engine. He drove her to the convenience store thirty minutes out of town that was open twenty four seven and he bought her two bottles of lighter fluid before they drove back to Hawkins. She made him turn down a long dark road, his dim yellow headlights the only light that seemed to exist within the trees.

"Here," she told him softly jerking in her seatbelt as he braked hard. She could smell it, smell her.

It's where an old man walking his dog had found her naked body, it nearly gave him a heart attack. The car's lights cut through the trees illuminating the yellow tape blocking off the surrounding area. Billy glanced at the ground seeing deep lines in the dirt from hands clawing desperately to get away. There was a puddle of blood next to a stained rock, a branch the width of his forearm covered in blood.

"Billy?"

He looked up at her soft voice understanding shining in his wet eyes. "What did he do to you?" His lips barely moved, his face contorted with pain.

"Hey," she said moving to where he'd stopped and reaching a hand to his cheek. He turned his head away from her but she pulled him back, holding his eye as they stood basked in the car's headlights. "I'm right here."

His breathing was ragged as his forehead rested over hers, his hands light around her back as if she might break. She raised her chin, the tip of her nose brushing his. "Come on," she said letting him go and stepping away. She wouldn't look at her crime scene, his hands might not be able to break her anymore but that would.

Louis barely made it a hundred yards before Veronica, who was for all intents and purposes dead, had been on him. "Holy shit," Billy cursed reaching a hand to his mouth before it ran through his hair. What was left of Louis was strewn across the ground torn to shreds, it didn't even look human anymore.

In the back of his mind his common sense was telling him she'd done this, that this wasn't her, that he needed to be scared. But he looked at her wide eyes full of need and he pulled the top off the lighter fluid and poured it over the blood caked ground.

She stood back watching him with black eyes, like her pupils had blown. He pulled out his lighter and set it ablaze, the flames shot up with a terrible fury and cracked like a stinging whip as it licked at the trees.

He turned feeling her eyes on him, there was something in the weight

of her stare - like she was starving. His breathing grew short as he stepped to her, a breath too warm passed between them as the fire grew and she lunged.

His back hit the ground knocking the wind out of him, and before he could sit up she settled on top of him holding him down. He raised a hand brushing her hair behind her ear and for a moment her eyes closed as she leaned into him. But the pang of insatiable hunger was devouring and she pulled his pants down over his legs and lowered herself onto him. He reached for her hips but she pulled his hands off her as she moved steadily faster. He was having a hard time catching his breath, why was she so heavy, when did her eyes get this black.

He tried to sit up but her hands slammed his shoulders down pinning him to the ground. She rode him til his eyes rolled back and his body trembled beneath her, and she released a shivering breath as she let go feeling something fluttering in her chest. God she was hungry, he'd be so good.

His eyes snapped open at the loss of her. "Hey," he called climbing to his feet on shaky legs. "What the hell was that, Ronnie?" He charged after her through the trees as she led him back to his car. "What's wrong with you?"

She stopped walking staring at the yellow tape tied to a tree, caution. "I tried letting you down easy," she said turning to him with something close to irritation on her face. "You're a good lay, Billy, but you're never gonna be enough for me." Hurt flashed on his face too much for him to mask as he gaped at her sudden cruelty. "What did you think, that we'd get married? I mean seriously how many girls have you screwed around with since we've been here? Do you even remember the girl you're supposed to be taking out tomorrow?" She laughed bitterly glaring up at his darkening expression. "No, Billy, it was never gonna be me and you."

"Fuck you," he spit at her his words laced with poison. If he got his hands on her, he didn't know if he could stop himself.

A smirk curled half her mouth as she shook her head. "Yeah," she sighed like she always knew he'd disappoint her.

Without another word she turned on her heel and slipped through the trees disappearing in the shadows, hearing his broken yell as he called her a whore. Her eyes flooded with tears too proud to fall as her legs carried her in a direction she didn't know. A low growl greeted her as she stepped into a backyard seeing an older woman taking her dog out.

"You okay, hun?" the woman asked shushing her dog whose hackles were raised. Such a young thing shouldn't be out so late looking so sad.

The first tear fell and the others were quick to fall behind it. "I'm sorry," Veronica whimpered, her chin quivering. The flutter in her chest turned to writhing as her flesh pulled itself apart opening like a flower in bloom revealing rows of sharp teeth. "I'm so hungry."

Next chapter's coming Monday, with a fun team up I'm excited for. Since this season only takes place in like not even a week there's just not a lot of time for anything extra. But I'm sneaking someone in here, and if you look at the characters I have attached to this story you know who it's gonna be.

Also, Billy was just a tad softer than I think he's capable of being in that scene in the record store, but I really wanted a sweet moment between them to show a hint of what they used to be. Because as you saw at the end of this one, it's getting a little rough.

4. We Can Be Kind Once More, Just Not Today

The sun was just barely peeking its head over the horizon when Veronica snuck in through the window. "Where did you go?" Max mumbled half asleep as she sat up blinking blearily at Veronica.

"I just needed some air," Veronica whispered having never lied to her sister like this before. Little lies that were done with the best of intentions but not like this. They laid down with Veronica at her back and an arm over her waist, so close she felt the moment Max slipped back into sleep as her breathing deepened steadily. "Something's wrong with me," Veronica told her trying to forget that poor woman's horrible screams.

She felt like she was gonna be sick, her stomach was too tight like it might burst any second. There was a terrible metallic taste in the back of her mouth, it hit her suddenly what it was.

She was gone when Max woke, the front door shutting is what'd woken her. And Max looked at the textbook Veronica had forgotten, swallowing the rising worry.

There weren't many people at the high school, not even all the teachers had shown up yet. Veronica just needed to be out of that house, it felt too small and warm, their hearts pounded like thunder – or maybe it was hers, she hadn't been able to tell. She was really after the library, because the one in town wouldn't open for a couple more hours. But after shoving her things in her locker her mouth filled with saliva and she ran for the bathroom. The door to the stall slammed against the wall as she threw herself on the ground in front of the toilet.

He'd come early hoping to catch Nancy, all he'd seen was a flash of hair before she'd run into the bathroom. "Hey, you alright?" Steve called from the doorway hearing her heaving. It made his own stomach churn but he inched closer to the stall. "Need me to get the nurse?" She had red hair, his shoulders slumped with his disappointed sigh. Then he saw the blood. "Oh shit," he exclaimed softly not knowing how that much had come out of her. It filled the bowl and was splattered on the side smeared under her hands as she

held onto the toilet to keep from collapsing.

She took a steadying breath and sighed relieved at finding the pain in her stomach was gone. Now she had another problem to deal with. She looked up at the wide-eyed boy and told him blandly, "either help me or get out."

He blinked finally kicking himself into gear. "Right," he said grabbing paper towels and helping her clean up while she washed her hands. "You do this often?" was his lame attempt at a joke. He didn't really know what to say.

Rinsing her mouth she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He looked nice, the last boy looked nice too. "Do you?" she asked, green eyes narrowing as she turned to him, catching the heavy way he swallowed. "Because you don't seem very bothered by this."

A shadow darkened behind her eyes as she stared up at him, and he reached a hand to rub the back of his neck uncomfortably. "Last year was really weird," is what he told her. Not that she would've believed him anyway, Nancy was the only one he could talk to about it and they weren't really talking anymore.

"Deal with a lot of girls puking blood?"

His brows rose and he scoffed a laugh. "Rude, but fair point. So what's your story then?"

She huffed a sigh taking the paper towel he offered and wiped her mouth. She couldn't tell him, she couldn't tell anyone. Not that she'd know what to say. "I don't care," she muttered pushing him aside as she left the bathroom. There were more people here now, it was closer to the first bell. Screw it, she thought, she missed first period yesterday what was another day if it got her closer to figuring out what was going on. She turned to Steve abruptly hearing him follow her. "You can only stay if you tell me what happened," she told him firmly.

He considered that, that she wouldn't really believe him anyway. "Fine, but you gotta talk too."

He'd never believe her. "Deal," she said and they shook on it.

They huddled in the corner of the empty library by the hulking computer they were supposed to get permission to use. She was looking through the few news reports the school library had for deaths, missing people, anything that sounded right. And Steve wove a detailed account of what happened last year, most of which she tuned out because it was mostly about Nancy who she didn't know. But she paused at his description of the creature he claimed he took out before admitting he had help.

"What did its mouth look like?"

He glanced at the side of her face not knowing why she looked familiar, he didn't remember seeing her before today. "Well you asked that for a reason." He met her sharp wide eyes wanting to ask her again what she was looking for but knowing she'd shut him down, again. He was honestly surprised she hadn't laughed him away, an uneasiness was settling in the pit of his stomach. He didn't really know how to explain it so he cupped his hands together and opened them to her – like a flower in bloom. "There were a lot of teeth," he remembered. "Did you see one?"

She was quiet several moments as she thought this through, if she could actually tell him, whether there might be a real answer. And if there was would she want to know it. Grabbing her notebook she drew a very crude representation of its mouth, four flaps like petals covered in teeth.

"So you did see one," he said needing to tell Nancy. She'd know what to do.

But Veronica shook her head staring hard at his earnest brown eyes. "It um," she held a hand at her chest watching his brows draw together as he waited, "it came out of me."

His expression was frozen for several long seconds before he sat back like she hit him. "That," once he pictured that he had a hard time getting it out of his head. His nose curled. "That's disgusting." She frowned and he held a hand up already taking it back. "No offense."

"I was gonna say horrifying but sure, Steven, lets go with disgusting." She turned back to the very large very slow hunk of junk that didn't have any answers for her.

He glanced at her clothed chest like he might be able to see something, but his eyes darted away not wanting her to catch him looking. "What now?" he asked having so many more questions he wanted to ask.

She sighed letting her shoulders fall in defeat. "I was really hoping you'd be able to tell me that." It was only the smallest direction, but she guessed it was better than nothing. She wasn't crazy, just dead and maybe a monster.

He scratched the back of his head wishing someone else had found her, anyone could help her more than he could. "There's a lab," he offered.

"What, and be turned into some science experiment?" She sounded offended, he didn't really know why. But she shook her head rolling her eyes. "Sorry," she said not meaning to be mean. "My sister reads a lot of comics, people as science experiments never really go well."

A light went off as the answer finally came to him, she saw it and sat up almost hopefully. "You're Billy's sister, that's why I know you."

She stared at him taking a deep irritable breath. "You're an idiot," she said grabbing her notebook and standing.

"Where are you going?"

"The main library, stop following me," she told him throwing the door open as she walked into the hall. They'd have an archive of old newspapers, maybe she'd find something there.

His hand on her arm stopped her, but she looked at where he was grabbing her and he quickly let her go. "I'll go with you, we can go after school," he offered seeing her eyes narrow. "Well I do know more about this than you."

"Barely," she shot back. Her narrowed eyes didn't leave his. "You wanna see it." He shrugged with feigned disinterest, his hands in his

pockets. "It's not a dick, I can't just whip it out," she told him sternly hearing his exasperated curse at her description. "And the last time it happened I ate an old lady."

"Jesus, what?" he breathed gaping down at her innocent seeming face. It hadn't seemed real before, just a strange coincidence. "That's what that was in the bathroom?"

Billy had found out the hard way she had very little patience when it came to waiting for people to catch up. She was smart, probably one of the smartest people he knew, and she held the impossible expectation everyone could keep up. "No, Steven, some girls have menses through their mouth."

He gagged while she rolled her eyes. She didn't need him, from the sound of it he didn't have much more to offer. She needed Billy, or she wanted Billy sometimes she got those two confused, either way she'd driven him away and he wouldn't help her now. And it felt so good to be able to say this out loud, to just have...anyone. Even if it was this idiot with weird hair. "After school," she relented, her voice softer than her face would allow.

"Basketball practice."

She shot him a scathing look already regretting including him. "Are you kidding me?" she asked rhetorically. He shrugged not understanding her sudden annoyance. "I tell you I ate someone and you're going to basketball practice?" Again he shrugged and she rolled her eyes, they might've stuck inside her head she rolled them so hard. "You're an idiot," she told him again walking away.

"What?" he asked innocently as he followed her.

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He'd given her a best guess for when he'd be done, Veronica spent that time in the main office on the phone with the librarian telling the curious woman what news reports she wanted pulled from the archives. That it was for a project.

She paced in the empty gymnasium looking up every time the door to

the locker room opened and growled a sigh when it wasn't Steve. She could hear him in there, could hear Billy too. And she knew that "other bitches in the sea," was mostly about her, she was his bitch. Checking her watch, again, she unfurled her crossed arms and threw the door open marching in.

It was mostly empty by then because everyone else had gotten their ass in gear and got ready, of course her ass would be one of the last ones. Steve's eyes bulged when he turned to see her glaring at him. He hadn't understood what he was seeing the first time, but the second time his lowered his hands turning his back more to her. "What the hell?"

"Hurry up, they close in two hours."

He looked at her over his shoulder feeling soap get into his eye. "You're impatient and mean," he mumbled to himself.

"I'm not mean," she snapped earning several surprised stares around the lockers at the remaining boys realizing she was there. Billy's eyes were cold as ice glancing between the two.

He scrubbed his hair and turned the water off taking the towel she held out for him. "You know I've been thinking," he said walking to his locker as he dried off, catching her eye roll, "since you," he turned to her lowering his voice, "ate," her eyes hardened irritably, "an old lady yesterday, do I need to be worried?"

Leaning against the locker next to his she watched him with her arms crossed, pissy. "If you don't put your dick away and come on," she warned losing what little patience she had.

"See, Mayfield, that was mean," he said pulling on his shirt, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Her face didn't change and he sighed grabbing his pants. "There's a new development in my situation."

Her face just barely, imperceptibly, softened as she looked up at him. He didn't notice, but Billy did. "We can get your girlfriend flowers on the way," she told him almost gently, but with a small annoyed edge.

He paused at her almost kind offering, it was probably the nicest she'd been to him. He turned to her and said, "I wasn't expecting that."

She nodded pushing off the locker, feeling Billy's hateful eyes burning the back of her head. She could hear his short angry breaths. But she was looking at Steve, because that's who she'd chosen to need - because she didn't care yet if she lost control and killed him. "I told you I wasn't mean. Now hurry the hell up before I leave your ass," she said brushing past him and shoving Tommy out of her way as she made for door. She pushed harder than she meant to and he flung a foot back hitting the locker and almost fell.

"Jesus Christ," Steve muttered grabbing his shoes and bag and running after her before she hurt someone else.

The door closed after him and Billy stood half dressed with his hands curled into tight fists, seething.

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Veronica stood at the hulking boxy machine scanning through various newspapers looking for anything to add up. She'd found everything there was to find from what Steve told her about last year; Will going missing, his funeral, him being found alive, a murdered restaurant owner, a very small mention of a girl at a store and the windows blowing out. Steve told her Will went to the middle school, she'd ask Max about him later, he didn't know much about the girl. Again it wasn't much of a direction but at least it was somewhere. And she was too smart to not already know how this was gonna end, she just wasn't ready to admit it.

She tasked Steve with book research, he just finished Greek mythological creatures and was looking unhappily at what he called satanic. Or rather he was looking at her chest again, the collar of her shirt was hanging a little too far off her frame and he could see mangled skin.

"Stop staring at my tits."

He jerked surprised and turned back to the book. "You know for the

first time that's actually not what I was looking at." She turned to him with a brow raised and he rolled his eyes so she didn't have to. "That sounded better in my head."

She hummed returning to the papers, going back further looking for anything about this lab Steve mentioned.

But he was bored, and the closest he got was a demon and she wasn't that. "So what's up with you and Billy?" he asked having seen the way Billy was watching her in the locker room. Like he owned her. "You guys are weird." He met her annoyed stare and shrugged. "He asked with a lot of tact," Steve added. "And you were very impressed."

She might've scoffed but the corners of her mouth were just barely curled with distant amusement. "We used to date," she answered, her eyes on the paper.

"You dated your step brother?" he asked reaching his own conclusion. Close quarters, she was very pretty, and Billy was proving he got around.

This time Veronica shrugged, she'd never really talked about this with anyone. "It's how our parents met."

He gave a quiet, oh, now understanding. "So you didn't break up because you stopped loving each other?" She shook her head and he flipped the page to try to look busy. "What brought you guys here?" Indiana was a far way from California, they had to be running from something.

Her eyes stilled on the monitor and turned glassy. "Officially it's because my sister tried to run away and find our dad, and my mom and Neil decided they wanted a fresh start."

"Unofficially?" he asked in a way he meant to be gentle.

Something shifted in her chest, it felt like her heart this time, and she sighed. "A lot of people found out I'd been knocked up by my step brother." That's what they wanted to get away from. Like they'd left it in California, like that emptiness inside her wasn't gonna be there forever.

He looked at the side of her pained face and couldn't for the life of him figure out what to say. "That sucks," is all he could come up with.

She nodded not having any other words herself. "Was I impressed with your eloquence in that statement?"

His eyes flicked to hers to find her waiting. "You were moved," he told her and her face split apart as she laughed, quiet and half heartedly, but it was a good start.

She sighed tucking her hair behind her ear. They weren't gonna find the answers here, she didn't think they would she was just looking for any proof that she wasn't going crazy. And she was crazy because this was as impossible as it was insane, but Steve for his part was keeping her grounded. He believed her in the barest sense, she could breathe and know this was real. She'd been taking care of herself, by herself, for so long she forgot how much of a relief it was to just have someone – someone that wasn't Billy. "Tell me again about the girlfriend," she told him seeing his surprise in the twitch of his brow. "Start from the beginning. We're gonna go over what you'll say, because you're an idiot and you'll screw it up."

He laughed shortly shaking his head. "Second time you called me an idiot, Mayfield. I'm almost offended."

"Third," she stated bluntly. "Good job proving my point."

A smile slid across her mouth and he shot her a dry look. "Just," he reached a hand to her face covering it and pushing her away, "put your face over there." Her light tinkling laughter had a smile tugging at his mouth. He hadn't been sure of her at first, she made it hard to relate to, and he definitely hadn't been sure when he realized she was Billy's sister – step sister, ex girlfriend, something more complicated. But she was proving to be kind of okay, even though he was pretty sure she did eat someone yesterday.

She called half an hour before dinner to tell her mom she was with a friend and would be late, but if she and Neil wanted she could bring home pizza for Max and Billy and they could go out. Veronica and Steve argued about what he should say while he ate, Veronica

personally didn't think he'd done anything and from what he told her she didn't care for Nancy much.

Billy was fuming when she finally showed up, twenty minutes later than she said, looking almost okay. Like herself, happy. They used to bicker the way she and Steve had earlier, she was so easy to irritate and god she liked it rough when she was irritated.

Setting the box on the counter Veronica grabbed plates ignoring him as long as he'd let her. "How was school?" Veronica asked Max as she came out of their room.

"Fine, I learned something in um," she glanced at Billy, who hadn't taken his eyes off Veronica, "social studies that I wanted to tell you."

Veronica held her eye and they shared a knowing look. "Maybe we can go for a drive after dinner, I can tell you what I learned today." Max was quick to nod having so many questions she needed to ask. Starting with whether Veronica was a zombie like Will.

"You know the longer you make me wait the worse it's gonna be."

She stiffened at his threat feeling it writhing inside her chest. "Fine," she hissed dropping his plate on the counter and brushing past him as she went to his room.

He slammed the door behind him and stood a breath away looking down at her dark eyes. "One day and you already got a new boyfriend. That's a record, Ronnie. I'm impressed."

"No, you're a dick," she shot back seeing his face slacken with hurt surprise before he sneered. "Don't you ever wonder what I saw in you? That's why you're so mad, right. Because Steven's got the looks, the charm, the confidence to not need me to hold his hand and make him feel good." She heard his knuckles crack as he balled his hands into fists, there wasn't a way to come back from what she was saying. That was the point. "He doesn't need me to be his mother."

The shock of that had his arm drawing back, his eyes were wide too late to stop himself from hitting her. Her hand shot up grabbing his wrist stopping the blow before it could fall, and she looked at him

with inky black eyes; like she'd been pulled straight from the pits of hell. He tried pulling away but she held fast, her fingers hooked like claws around his arm – she could break it if she wanted to.

She stepped forward forcing him back until his knees hit the bed and he sat looking up at her as she stood in the space between his feet, a hint of fear in his wide eyes. "Tell me to stop," her voice was weak and soft, but she wasn't either of those things anymore. He could tell her to stop, he could beg her to, and she didn't have to listen. She could make him, he could scream and there wasn't anything that could stop her.

no one's gonna hear you scream

Nothing would ever hurt her again.

"Stop," his mouth formed the word but he couldn't get enough air to give it sound. She looked deranged, feral, starving. There was a moment he honestly thought she wouldn't, he could almost see it in those pupilless eyes – she didn't want to.

But she blinked and tears filled her green eyes as she let him go and stepped back reaching a hand to her quivering chest. She'd been about to kill him. She stared down at him hearing every beat of his heart, hearing Max at the door as she listened. And her face filled with a terrible, mournful, knowing. She couldn't stay.

She charged out of his room snatching her keys off the counter and racing for her truck. "You can't come with me," she told Max as she followed her out of the house.

"Why not?" Max pleaded not wanting her to go. Her dad told her the same thing before he left, she couldn't lose Veronica too. She came around the driver's side where Veronica stood with her back to her. "Is it because you're a zombie?" That's what Will was, but Will wasn't like her.

Veronica turned to her looking sadder than Max had ever seen her, and she'd been so sad when Neil brought her home from the doctor's a month ago. "I don't know," Veronica admitted not knowing what Max was talking about only that it had to be related. But there was

this awful gnawing inside her, like it'd kill her if she didn't fill it. And Max's heart was so loud, why was it so loud. "I'll be back," she promised pulling open the door desperate to get away from her.

"That's what dad said too."

Veronica stilled at her broken angry voice feeling her face burn with shame. "I will be back," she said not looking at her sister before she climbed behind the wheel.

"I hate you!" Max screamed, tears in her eyes, not meaning it for a second.

Backing out of the driveway Veronica's face crumbled. "I hate me too," she whispered to herself, but she couldn't stop. She couldn't stop until she far enough away she couldn't hurt her.

She finally stopped at a liquor store she knew Billy had gone to and wouldn't ID her. Maybe she'd drink it out of her, give it alcohol poisoning; do anything so she could just go home.

With her brown bagged bottle in hand she walked across the dark parking lot to her truck.

"You don't look old enough to drink."

She drew to a slow stop as her body stiffened, and she turned slowly to the already half drunk man leaning against his car. He was maybe ten years older than her, his face scarred from years of acne, his eyes dark.

But hers were darker. "I'm not," she told him, feeling his gaze crawling over her. "What would you do to me?" she asked turning to him, watching his stare fall to her round chest.

He licked his lips and huffed a short laugh. She was a pretty little thing, he didn't know what he did to deserve her falling into his lap. "What do you want me to do?" he asked instead. He was drunk enough he'd do anything she asked.

Her mouth carved a toothy smile, it wasn't pretty. "Get in the truck." Her voice was a low growl, her eyes darker than the sky above them.

"Okay," he agreed without thought as he walked to where she stood. She was short, had narrow shoulders and wide eyes. "We don't have to do anything, we can just talk," he told her, having thought she looked sad before. She didn't look sad now, she looked hungry.

"Get in the truck," she told him again. It wasn't a request and he wasn't sober enough to realize he didn't have a choice. That hellish stare followed him as he walked around to the other side of her truck and climbed in. And she slid behind the wheel with a faint grin looking almost sweet, she wouldn't look like that for long.

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She pulled up to the music store wearing an almost serene expression as she climbed out of her empty truck. Unlocking the door she stepped inside and gripped the lock as though to turn it, but she let go leaving it open. She wasn't a damsel or a princess needing a knight to save her. She was the goddamn dragon. No one was ever gonna hurt her again.

Making her way to the back she flipped the light on in the bathroom and moved in front of the mirror. There was no innocence in her eyes, they weren't wide or sweet, or soft. Her nimble fingers unbuttoned her blouse as she breathed deeply. Perfect pretty Veronica, such a good girl - she didn't have to be that anymore. She didn't need Billy she was stronger than him now, didn't need to be careful with Neil he was scared of her now.

She traced the lines carved into her chest starting at either collarbone down to where they met just over her heart and trailed down to her belly button. Her lips parted and she breathed tasting the air, watching her skin pull itself apart. Deep purple flesh writhed inside her, and her flower bloomed spreading out from her chest covering her breasts making her shiver as it's smooth skin grazed them. The teeth filling its mouth were made from her ribs and behind them she could see her heart. She watched it quiver as though to beat before it unwrapped itself and opened, gaping. Nothing would ever hurt her again. A thought that'd been lingering in the farthest corner of mind came forward, making itself known, taking on her name. She didn't want to stop.

5. Fight pain with more pain

Her body rocked to the deep throbbing of the bass, her head thrown back and her eyes closed, her shirt still in the bathroom no longer caring to hide the scars on her chest as she danced. She'd had to step into the role of an adult since her dad left, she had to be perfect because nothing else was, she had to do the right thing and be the right thing for everyone so everyone else could be happy. And she didn't have to anymore.

She tossed her head in time with the beat, her flame colored hair dripping down her back like a waterfall. And she smiled, finally free. But the world fell away and the music faded as she came to a crashing halt, and she turned slowly looking over her shoulder at the door. There was a flutter of movement unseen through the glare on the windowed doors of the music store. Her black eyes stared unblinking as she slowly moved to the door seeing the waist high creature standing on all fours looking up at her.

A soft chirr sounded in the back of its throat as she stepped outside and the thing in her chest rippled giving its own warm response. The look on her face was so horribly soft like her love wasn't made for anything else, like the way she looked at Max. It circled her once rubbing against her legs like a child before it crawled forward and turned looking at her waiting for her to follow.

It led her into a tunnel underground, dark and musty like an old basement no one knew was there. She could hear the vines slithering like snakes along the walls and the ground of this place, festering. And yet the deeper she went the closer it felt like going home even though she'd never been here.

There were voices ahead, muffled and some staticky. She slowed listening as they talked to one another, looking for something less than a hundred feet in front of them. An echo shuddered inside her and she lost her breath nearly falling to her knees under the weight of it, like a wordless voice. The distant light inside the tunnel in front of her grew brighter. Beckoning.

It was her, that's who they were looking for she'd shown up on their

radar. Tears slipped down her cold cheeks as she stepped back, her face contorting with terrible pain. She stumbled back the way she'd come trailing a hand along the wall feeling the vines reaching to wrap lightly around her wrists, touching her.

The sun was high in the sky as she climbed out of the tunnel and she gasped breathing clean fresh air, and her mind returned to her. Her green eyes blinked at the blue sky as she heaved trying to figure out her next move. Whatever was there, trapped on the other side, wanted her. She was part of it, and she could feel it getting stronger. Dragging herself to her feet she made her way through the woods to where her truck stood in front of the store.

"You're late," the owner of the record store told her. He had long greasy hair and smelled sour, like pot. "What happened to you?" he asked at the sight of her dirty jeans and tangled hair that hung over her chest.

"Long night," was her quick answer as she grabbed her keys and headed back out, not bothering to grab the shirt still on the floor of the bathroom. She drove home, only it didn't feel like home anymore. She didn't feel like her anymore.

The only car in front of the house was Billy's, she took it as a blessing since it meant Neil wasn't here. She took it as an even bigger one that Billy was in the shower. It'd make this easier, even though no part of this was easy. Charging into her room she looked first to the open window and then dumped the contents of her backpack onto her bed. Max was probably off with her stalkers, Veronica figured they had something to do with what was going on with her. She rifled through the dresser grabbing enough clothes to fit in the bag, she could deal with needing more later. She snatched an old faded book off the shelf and opened it seeing the rolls of money stashed inside. She'd found it in a thrift store, its cover was worn leather but its pages were made of wood - Max was the only one who knew about it. Stuffing that in the bag she grabbed the small box Max found and painted blue for her one birthday, Veronica had to get rid of so many things in the move but anything important was in here. She put that in her backpack too and zipped it up, and she stood a moment in their room trying to soak in that feeling.

If she didn't rip this bandaid off she never would. So with a sigh she pulled on another shirt not caring that it hung too low on her chest as she made to leave. But her feet stilled in the hallway next to the bathroom door hearing the water running, everything she'd ever been she'd been with him. The strap slipped off her shoulder and she turned the handle hearing the way the water hit his body and rolled off his edges.

He turned startled at the curtain being ripped back. "What the hell?" he demanded scrubbing the conditioner out of his hair. "Seriously, Ronnie, what the hell are you doing?" he asked as she climbed into the tub with him. Her hands came around his face and his next question was smothered beneath her mouth. She kissed like a man on fire desperate for water. Beside himself he sighed against her gathering his arms around her, feeling her pulling him further against her. Like she was trying to bury him inside her chest.

She pulled away when they needed air and she tightened her arms around his neck hugging him close, so close she could feel his heart beating against hers. His hands were light on her back, unsure, still angry and hurt at the things she said. "I love you." Her words left her mouth into his ear and he almost shivered at her warm breath.

He looked down at her as she pulled back, water catching in her hair, the front of her soaked. His eyes fell to her chest and he reached gentle fingers to the scars he was only now seeing she had. She looked so sad, he didn't understand why this felt like goodbye.

Stepping back she took a breath and pulled the curtain closed and shut herself out of the bathroom, separating them. There was so much she wanted to tell him, that he needed to hear. He needed to know that she lied, it was always going to be him. But she knew if she opened her mouth all that would come out was asking him to runaway with her, and he couldn't.

Her eyes flicked to his room and she stepped into it smelling him everywhere. Before she left she stuffed one of his button ups in her backpack, taking the only part of him she could trust herself with.

She didn't know where her sister was, she'd try the arcade first then one of her stalkers houses. It'd be dark soon and she had to do this

before Neil or her mother came home, god her mother. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel refusing the tears that gathered behind her eyes, she had more important things to do than cry.

With the window down she didn't make it far on the long windy road through thick trees, the scent of souring meat and something faintly familiar beneath it had her slowing as she pulled over. Climbing out she slipped through the trees with light feet, unheard, as she crept closer to the smell. She stood over the train tracks looked down at what had once been a chunk of meat, and she slowly lowered herself to a crouch as she looked at the saliva left behind.

Her eyes flicked a few feet ahead of her to another slobbery mess, and she rose to her feet seeing every so often the remains of meat. Bread crumbs. Only Veronica could smell the different prey they were trying to lure, and beneath that she caught the scent that first had her pulling over. Hair spray. "Idiot."

She followed the trail hoping, really hoping, she wasn't gonna find her sister at the end of it. There was a commotion ahead of her where the tree line opened up, yelling and banging she couldn't distinguish, a guttural growl that had her reaching a hand to her chest. And then she heard it, a loud terrified scream. Max.

"Out of the way!" Steve yelled shoving her back as he stood under the hatch in the bus as one of those damn things hovered over him. "You want some? Come get this!" he cried tightening his grip on the bat. He was ready to swing seeing it crouch as though to lunge, and he jumped as another of those creatures slammed into it sending them both over the side.

A loud clang jolted the bus shaking them all as something jumped on the roof, and Steve shifted his grip on the bat seeing its shadow. A slimy hand with hooked claws dug into the edge of the hatch as it crawled back onto the roof, and Steve watched it raise high on its haunches pissed at something. But it stilled and turned suddenly as though it'd been called.

They disappeared as suddenly as they'd shown up, and Steve waited still ready to swing as they jumped over the bus and ran. There was still something up there, he could see the dent it was leaving in the

metal. It crept closer and he brought his arm back just as he caught sight of it. "Oh thank god," he sighed looking up at Veronica letting his arms fall.

"Hey," she said sliding inside and dropping to the floor with a loud clang.

He brushed his hair back almost smiling. "Hey," he told her in return.

"What?" she asked looking at him with her brows drawn deeply together. "No, not you," she said shoving him aside. His back hit the wall of the bus and he rolled his eyes, but he watched her gather the girl in her arms realizing that's why she was here. "Are you okay?" she asked taking Max's pale face in her hands as she looked hard at her wide eyes.

Max nodded looking up at her sister. "How did you find me?"

A small, sad, smile twitched over Veronica's mouth. "I'll always find you," she told her feeling a horrid pull inside her, a need to go back to that thing.

She could see that in Veronica's eyes, the pain. She knew. But Steve moved around them, his hand light on Veronica's back, as he pulled the door open. Veronica followed him with an arm held out keeping the three kids behind her, she could hear one at the edge of the junkyard but his feet scampered off leaving nothing but silence. Silence and their heavy breathing, she could barely hear anything over that.

"What happened?" Lucas asked as he climbed out after Veronica. Max was behind him, and after her was Dustin. "Steve scared him off," Dustin offered, it sounded like a question.

"No," Steve answered slinging the bat over his shoulder as he turned to them. "They're going somewhere."

Another time she would've rolled her eyes at his dramatics, but not this one. She turned to Max suddenly realizing she hadn't grabbed any of her clothes – as if part of her knew she'd never be able to take her. "You're leaving," Max said for her, seeing it shining in her green

eyes. "Are you one of those things?"

"Something like them," Veronica answered hearing the two boys curse as they stepped back. She drew Max a little further away, and Steve kept Lucas and Dustin back to give them a moment. "If I stay I'll hurt you." That thing was calling her, she wanted to go, she'd already almost killed Billy twice. "I can't stay knowing that." She brushed Max's long hair out of her broken face.

She sniffed back the tears not wanting them, her eyes were on the ground and she frowned looking mad. "Are you ever gonna come back?" With the back of her sleeve she swiped the tear that escaped.

Veronica caught the other reaching a gentle hand to her cheek. "I just have to figure out how to control it, then I'll come home," she told her, like it wasn't a big deal. Like it might just be a few days when they both knew it'd be longer. "And if you wanna run away, we'll run away." She dabbed under her own eyes wishing so much had been different. "If you wanna stay, we can stay."

Max looked up at her and saw past the mask she wore to make it look like this could be okay, it wasn't okay. Nothing was ever going to be okay again. "I didn't mean it," she said on a broken breath.

"I know," Veronica assured her, cupping her face in her hands. She saw the relief in Max's eyes at hearing that she knew she didn't hate her. "I love you so much." Holding them together she took a steadying breath and ripped this bandaid off. "Steven," she said turning to where he stood with the others who watched with muted sympathy.

"I'll look out for her," he told her, returning her nod with a small smile he meant to be encouraging.

Beside him Lucas piped in. "I will too. I mean, um, we will too." He elbowed Dustin who gave his quick agreement, although he was watching Veronica suspiciously looking for what part of her was like Dart.

With the faintest smile Veronica turned back to her sister. "My answer was right, he is cute." She didn't need light to know the way

Max blushed, grumbling about that not being true. "I will be back," she swore to her. And she raised a hand extending only her pinky. "Together or nothing, right?"

"Right," Max agreed linking her pinky with Veronica's. And they held each other as long as they could before they'd both start crying again. Max threw her arms around her waist and squeezed her tight. "I love you too."

Pressing a firm kiss to the top of her head Veronica stepped back and turned, knowing if she looked at her again she'd never be able to leave. And she slipped back through the trees like a shadow in the night.

She climbed into her truck and sat with her hands gripping the wheel and everything telling her to stay. Taking a deep breath she held it, held it as long as she could til her heart was aching, and she let it go. She turned the key in the ignition and pulled the stick into drive and steered back onto the road.

The voice inside her beckoning her to the lab grew progressively quieter the further she drove from Hawkins. She felt the moment the tie to that thing broke and she sighed settling in her seat as the wind blew through her hair. There was nothing left in the world to keep her from flying away, so she did.

She didn't stop until she needed gas, it was an hour from dawn and the station she pulled into off the highway was empty, save for a car parked in the shadows just past the lit up pumps.

Standing against the side of her truck as the pump ran she hummed the ending to the song that'd been playing. "What's a pretty thing like you doing out so late?"

Her hum cut out at his gruff leering voice. Like she'd taken a knife to her face she smiled and turned black eyes to him. His mustache reminded her of Neil's. "I was waiting for you," she answered in a voice as sweet as candy.

He smirked gripping the edge of her truck bed, with the line from the gas behind her it'd make running harder. "That right, sweetheart," he

said, his voice low as he leaned over her.

She stared up through her lashes at him. "What would you do to me?" she asked turning to him and reaching her little hands to the buttons on his flannel.

He let out a breath of a laugh at his luck stumbling on this little beauty. She had the darkest Bambi eyes and the sweetest mouth, the way she bit her bottom lip was driving his nuts as she slowly undid every button. He told her the things he'd do, not all of them were nice, but she wore a kittenish grin as she pushed him back toward his truck. It was parked in the shadow, less likely to be seen. Behind her the nozzle clicked as her truck filled, and she pushed him into the bed of his. She settled on his lap pulling her shirt over head.

"What happened here?" he asked tracing the lines over her chest. Just the faintest hint of unease clouding the back of his mind. A warning. But she unhooked her bra and he didn't head it.

He let her do what she wanted, and hell if she wasn't the most eager little thing as she bounced on top of him. He didn't know what daddy issues she had, didn't know who hurt her, but as he laid back watching her he honestly could've thanked them.

She blinked down at him hearing each ragged breath he took. His eyes were the wrong color, his face the wrong shape. She hated him. Grabbing his hands she pulled them to her chest hearing his heavy sigh as he smiled. But something writhed beneath her skin and his smile slipped away as flesh the color of raw liver bloomed out of her chest.

He cried out jerking away but her hands were shackled to his wrists and she grew steadily heavier crushing his pelvis beneath her as she kept riding him. She pulled his hands into its mouth and he howled as she fed. Sinking her nails in his shoulders she pulled him to her chest watching it wrap around his head. He thrashed about kicking his legs, and she threw her head back letting her cries mingle in the empty night air with his.

When she'd had her fill of him she let him go and what was left of his corpse hit the metal of the truck bed with a dull thump. She climbed

out and pulled her clothes on, taking a moment to fix her hair as she caught her breath. Walking back to her truck she put back the nozzle screwed the cap on and got behind the wheel again. She didn't know where she was going, but hell was sure to follow.

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December 24

It was quiet in the sleepy town of Hawkins, the air held a biting chill threatening snow. But something dark and wild stood on the street looking up at one house, the two bedroom windows on the right were dark, Neil sat in the living room with a beer watching the news. There'd been a rise in what appeared to be animal attacks in the upper midwest; people were found half eaten, mauled. There was faint suspicion of a serial killer.

The window to Max's room silently slid open and a long shadow moved over her face and hovered there moments too long, something brushed her forehead. The chill from the open window is what woke her, and at the sight of her gently blowing curtains Max sat up turning on the light with her heart racing. It stopped when she saw the skateboard sitting on Veronica's bed with a red bow on top.

It'd been over a month with no word from her, Billy was Billy only harder, her mother was sadder, and Neil refused her name ever be spoken. Max threw herself at the window desperate to see her. But all she saw was night and the first fragile flurries of what would end up being a white Christmas. "I love you too," she whispered into the night, knowing wherever she was she'd hear it.

Veronica stepped out from behind the house across from them with a small smile as she headed back out of town, passing under a streetlight that shined in her inky black eyes.

And so ends season 2. I know it's not hugely satisfying to keep her so far from the action in the last two episodes but I always planned to end it here - especially given the connection she has to the Mind Flayer. And that will all be explored as I get into season 3, but next chapter will be in between the two seasons and will address a few details there wasn't time to

explore.

Also, that is as detailed as I plan to go into what she's doing with her victims; just as a little glimpse, so that now ya'll know what she's doing to everyone she eats. And it's heavily tied into how she died and the fact that she's still very broken from that.

6. Bow to the will of a dead girl walking

To make up for how long this took me to post I made this one long. And kind of sweet. However at the end, ya'll, she's evolved - and this story may need to go to M.

But chapters will be posted probably weekly for now, and really season 3 isn't gonna be long either. Anyways, onto the chapter. Hope you guys enjoy.

Max wanted it to be like any other day, nothing special or happy because it wasn't either of those things. She already told her mom she didn't want to do anything for her birthday, she knew Lucas didn't listen and was planning something. And sometimes she'd almost want her birthday until she got home and saw that empty bed against the wall.

It came on a Thursday this year, which suited her well enough. There was school and homework, no time for a party or anything else. Lucas gave her something small, said he had something bigger planned. She was still technically mad at him for lying about being sick so he could hang out at Mike's house, but it made her smile.

Billy drove her home, because they were at least having a family dinner their mom said. "Don't waste your life waiting for her," Billy said sighing smoke from his lungs as he pulled up to their house.

It wasn't the first time he said that only this time Max was having trouble rising to her defense. They couldn't even say her name, like the sound of it alone would make everything fall apart. "Who's that?" Max asked as they walked past the large van parked in their driveway. In Neil's spot.

"Hell if I know," Billy mumbled stubbing out his cigarette and tossing it in the grass. It was white with green trim, a thought crossed his mind he was quick to shake off.

Max went inside hearing her mother's voice in her bedroom, there was a soft reply Max couldn't make out but it set her heart to racing as if something in her knew. Her mother stepped out into the hall

wearing a bright smile, looking happier than she had in months. Like the light inside her had turned on again, she looked beautiful. "I know you said you didn't want anything special," Susan told her, her face split wide with joy.

Her brows drew together wondering what her mom was talking about, but Max's face broke open with the most wonderful surprise when Veronica stepped out of the room. "Ronnie!" she cried barreling into her. It was like hitting a solid warm wall from how little Veronica was moved, but they squeezed each other tight like it was the only thing that'd keep the world spinning.

That name had Billy pausing on the front step, his breath catching in his throat. He threw the door aside and stormed into their home and came to a crashing halt at the sight of her standing with her arms around Max. Her hair was curlier than he remembered, but it was her sweet face even if her eyes were the color of hell and burned just as hot. For a moment he almost forgot she'd left him.

Veronica could hear his ragged angry breaths but she didn't look at him, he wasn't why she was here. She shared Max's wide smile feeling for the first time since she'd left almost complete. "You're taller than me," she noticed.

Max nodded seeing it too, three inches didn't seem like a lot but she almost had to look down at her eyes. But Veronica was softer in her round curves where Max was still growing into hers, Max thought she looked better than when she left. She'd been so thin and frail, she was almost glowing now.

"Why don't you two go for a drive, I'll finish getting dinner ready," Susan offered, her hand touching Veronica's hair as though to assure herself she was still there.

Veronica turned to Max with a brow raised and she was quick to agree. The two girls headed out with their arms linked together, passing a still shell shocked Billy. "Hey," she told him simply.

After months with no word, thinking she was dead or hurt or had dumped him like his mom had, all he got was hey. But she was here, looking hotter than she had any right in a halter top and high-waist

jeans with a ring in her nose. He could smell her shampoo. "Hey," he told her in kind.

A smile curled one corner of her mouth as she and Max stepped outside heading for her van. "You got rid of your truck," Max noted feeling like they'd lived a lifetime apart. But with a grin that looked the way home felt Veronica slid open the side door and flipped the switch for the lights.

"No way," Max said looking at the warm glow from the string of lights to the neatly made bed and the blacked out windows she'd turned into shelves. They were covered in little trinkets and books, and detailed drawings on the cardboard shelves. "You can go anywhere." This is what freedom looked like, and she breathed in the alluring smell of Veronica's perfume.

"Yup," Veronica agreed with a strange smile. The van she'd taken from a man who called her his flower child, he'd almost tasted like flowers when she ate him. But the thin fragile drawings of spiraled patterns and mandalas, and one of her as she lay naked under the stars, had been done by one of the kindest hearts she'd met. A caramel colored girl with dark hair who had sweet hands and a warm smile, she stayed the longest before Veronica left her at a gas station too afraid of what she'd do to her if she stayed for good.

They climbed in the front and headed for the highway, with the wind tearing at their sunlicked hair they belted every song that came on before dissolving into a fit of giggles. Max and Veronica, Veronica and Max. Since the beginning of time, how it'd always been and how it'd always be.

Max filled her in on everything she missed, of knocking Billy out and how he was now almost better. Neil was almost better too, there were bad days here and there times where Billy's mouth got the better of him but it was almost better. The only thing missing was Veronica.

"How's your stalker?"

Max rolled her eyes but it didn't hide her smile. "Lucas is fine, in trouble for lying to me though."

Veronica hummed a laugh. "They do that a lot don't they?" she asked making them both laugh. "How's Neil with him?"

She was quiet a few moments before answering. "He doesn't really know," she admitted. Neil said the worst things about Lucas and his family, she wanted to hurt him they made her so furious. He didn't know Lucas, she didn't understand how Neil could hate him without knowing him. He was stupid sometimes but he could be sweet, like whatever surprise he was planning for her made him smile this little smile and she'd want to kiss him. Her eyes narrowed as they slid to Veronica's innocent face. "You're helping him with his present."

She raised a shoulder not looking at her, because Max would see it in her face if she looked at her. "Guess you'll find out." But Max saw the very very faint way the corners of her mouth pulled up, and that made her feel so warm inside she laid her head on Veronica's shoulder.

They pulled over as their favorite song came on and they danced together on the side of the road, their voices and laughter given to the trees and everything that dwelt within them like a humble offering.

"We should probably head back," Veronica said as she checked the time. She looked at Max seeing a mirrored disappointed look on her face, and she almost thought of taking her. They could be happy again, a family again, but she pushed that thought aside knowing Max didn't want to leave. "We've got til Monday," she told her pulling the side door open and jerking her head to the back. "I know you wanna."

Max had stolen glances at the back of the van the whole ride, she wanted to see the life her sister had found on her own. So she hopped in and sat on the pretty quilt covering the bed thinking it looked like a tapestry. While Veronica drove Max looked at everything, all the little trinkets she'd collected and the books she loved enough to replace, the Polaroid camera with someone else's name on it - Samantha . There was a long gold chain with little golden coins strung across the wall and she ran a finger across it hearing them tinkle like chimes.

She smiled finding the box she'd given Veronica a couple years ago and she flipped it open looking at the familiar photographs, a little collection of shells, their grandfather's old pocket watch, a pearl they'd found in an oyster years ago.

Max next traced some of the spiraled designs drawn with pen on the shelves. Whoever did them had spent a lot of time here, each one was drawn with painstaking detail. She found the one of Veronica, it had heat rising in her face to see the care taken in capturing the likeness of her body – someone who loved her had done that. But she reached a shy hand to the trace the lines carved on her chest, remembering what Lucas told her that Dustin told him that Steve had told him was wrong with her. And she glanced at her sister tapping a beat on the steering wheel.

A book caught Max's eye, old and worn tied with a string. It was a journal. Max flipped through the brown pages seeing the same patterns scattered throughout as they were in the van. More detailed drawings spanned the book, cities they'd been to, a coffee shop, Max didn't catch it the first time but she realized the further she flipped through the more Veronica could be found in the background, some were just of her face, more of her body. In the book she found a collection of polaroids, taken from the camera she'd found.

She knew her sister's face, the months she'd been gone had made her features fuzzy but seeing her now made it clear again - pretty but with an edge to her stare that came with bitter pain. But she didn't know the other girl photographed beside her. She had soft feminine features with narrow eyes and a tall willowy frame, she was beautiful. And she smiled with such warmth at her sister.

Max shuffled through the Polaroids, five of them were of the two in front state signs their arms around each other, on the beach, posing with a statue, getting their noses pierced, kissing under a sky lit by fireworks. New Years, Max realized. The last three went together and they played like a movie. Veronica lay on this bed, her hair covering her bare chest as she looked up at the camera with the softest eyes as she smiled. And then the girl was lying beside her just as naked holding the camera above them as they both beamed. And the last one Veronica had turned kissing her open mouthed.

Max didn't recognize this Veronica. There was a weightlessness to her, her smile hiding nothing but her happiness, free. Picking the picture of them in front of the welcome to Alaska sign Max climbed into the front seat next to her sister. "Who's this?" she asked holding it up to her.

Stealing a glance at the photo Veronica sighed though she wasn't surprised. "Sam," she answered and her voice sounded far away.

"Did you love her?"

With a sad smile Veronica shook her head, not saying the thought that haunted her: she wasn't sure if she was capable of loving anyone but Max. And sometimes that scared her. But what she said, because it was easier, was, "I told her about you."

Max looked up from their smiling faces with wide eyes, unable to get past the strangeness of her sister looking at someone like that who wasn't Billy. "You did?: she asked quietly, having thought on the really bad days Veronica had been running away from her too. But Veronica nodded reaching a hand to brush Max's hair back as she pulled into their neighborhood. "Did you tell her about Billy?" She was quiet a moment before she nodded again. "Did you tell her that you eat people?"

Veronica's eyes widened as she turned to her sister. There was only one person in this town who knew that. "Idiot," she muttered parking in the driveway and cutting the engine. "Well I didn't tell her that," Veronica said running a hand through her hair.

This time Max nodded and straightened as she looked at Veronica seriously. "Do not eat anyone while you're here," she told her trying to make herself seem older, like she was someone that needed to be listened to.

Veronica's brows rose as she bit back a smile, seeing so much of who she used to be in her sister. "Okay," she agreed without fight. The hunger had lessened with time, she could go almost two weeks before she'd lose control. And she'd fed the day before she came.

But Max wasn't satisfied because last year two people went missing,

one of them had been Veronica's age. So she held out her pinky to her. "Promise."

With a dramatic sigh she linked her pinky with Max's. "Fine, I promise."

They shared a grin before climbing out and heading inside. Max went to the kitchen her mom was still smiling as hse finished up Max's favorite dinner. But Veronica stood a step past the front door having caught sight of Neil, and she stared with bated breaths like a cat ready to lunge. No one had ever made her feel smaller or weaker than this man had, he never would again. He knew it too as he stood with a hand clenched around the back of his chair, frozen under the weight of her gaze. Those black eyes promising hell, the scars visible from how low that shirt hung on her chest, whatever she was she wasn't Veronica.

But she smiled and he took the first breath he'd been able to get since he saw her. She moved to him pressing a firm kiss to his cheek, feeling the heavy breath he took at how close she'd gotten to the corner of his mouth. "Thank you for letting me stay," she told him like she'd given him a choice when she called last month.

"We're happy you decided to visit," he said his gentle voice baring a sharp edge making it known he wasn't happy. That she'd left, that she hadn't given any sign she was even alive until she called to tell him she was staying the weekend of Max's birthday, that she was here now with a ring in her nose wearing a shirt that may as well have been a bra for all it covered. He had so many things to be angry for.

And for the first time in so many years she didn't have to give a flying fuck. She smiled as he pulled her chair out for her, feeling his hand on her shoulder before he sat at the head of the table beside her.

It was a nice dinner with them all there again. Susan asked Veronica what she'd been up to and they all listened surprised as she told them of her travels and the people she met along the way. She'd picked up a few hitchhikers and took them where they were headed, she camped with a couple she met for a week to see the Northern lights. And this was all so unlike her that no one really knew what to say. They barely recognized her.

Billy sat with knitted brows and a heavy frown as he watched her cut her food and push it around her plate, gather it on her fork and lifted it to her mouth before piling it on the other side, so that by the time everyone was done it looked like she'd eaten half when really she hadn't taken a bite. She was so meticulous, infuriatingly rigid, and this just wasn't her. It's what he used to think he wanted her to be, wild and cold, but he'd been wrong.

Veronica helped her mother collect everyone's plates and cleaned them while her mom lit the candles on the cake. Max sat at the table with the urge to turn around and see what they were doing, but she instead stole glances at Billy who couldn't seem to take his eyes off Veronica even though it looked like he wanted to. She expected him to be angry, to yell or break something or to hate her, but he just looked like it hurt.

Veronica's voice suddenly filled the quiet home, sweet and small as she walked the cake to the table. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you." The light from the candles shone in those bottomless eyes, like the cold expanse of the universe threatening to swallow them into oblivion was buried somewhere inside them. "Happy birthday, dear Maxine," she cooed standing at her back and setting the cake in front of her. "Happy birthday to you."

Max smiled as Veronica's arm came around her shoulders, her breathy voice telling her softly to make a wish. She wished everything would stay exactly like this, and she blew the candles out.

They sat in the living room for some time after, Max opened the couple of gifts her parents had gotten her and a card with money Billy gave her. She'd had better birthdays but as she sat pressed against Veronica's side she wouldn't trade this one for anything. "So what'd you get me?" she asked feeling Veronica's hand in her hair.

"I thought I was the gift."

Max turned shooting her a look. "You never called to say you were okay, you better have gotten me something else." It was close to what they all wanted to say, that she'd left all of them and they were all in their own way bitter about how fine she was without them. But only Max dared.

And Veronica smirked at her sister's strong will, she'd missed her so much. "Guess you'll find out Saturday."

It got late enough for a school night that Max turned in, after showering Veronica turned in as well hugging her desperate mother and kissing Neil's cheek as she went. She laid on what used to be her bed in what used to be her room and though she wasn't who she used to be she felt for the first time in months like herself again. She and Max talked for a while hearing the tv muffled behind the closed door, Max wanting to know how many people she'd eaten and Veronica deftly avoided answering by asking her how things were here. Only for them both to quiet at realizing things were better, now that Veronica was gone. And they stayed quiet when they both came to the sad understanding she was only staying two days.

It was late, the living room dark and their parents asleep, Max was on her way and Lane was lying on her side looking out window at the shadows, when their door quietly opened.

She could hear his soft breathing as he stood over the bed, could almost hear his thoughts before he sighed and laid curled against her back with an arm tight around her waist. "Thought you were mad at me," she said softly knowing it's why he hadn't tried talking to her, or being near her, or do anything but stare at her because that's as close as he could get without taking her back because he'd missed her.

With his mouth against her shoulder he mumbled, "I'll be mad at you tomorrow." Because she'd be here tomorrow, there was time to be angry he didn't have to be now. Her hand slid down the arm he had around her and stopped wrapped loosely around his wrist as she shifted her weight getting more comfortable against him. A heavy breath left him and his eyes closed as he settled with her finally back in his arms. He could be angry at her tomorrow.

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With a rough shake to Veronica's arm Max woke them both before Neil could find them. He was being weirdly calm with everything, but this had always made him yell. And once, right before he took Veronica to the doctor he'd hit Billy hard enough it burst a blood vessel in his right eye. It was the first time he'd hit Billy when

Veronica was there, she'd pulled Neil by his bruising hand out of the house as he continued screaming at his bleeding son.

Veronica unwound her arms from around Billy's shoulders having rolled over cradling him to her chest sometime in the night. It took him a moment to let her go, like he thought she'd disappear, but with a groan he climbed off the bed and padded softly to his room.

When Max finished getting ready she found Veronica already dressed with her shoes on leaning against the counter in the kitchen looking up at Neil. "You need to change," he told her sternly. This shirt might've had sleeves and the collar might've sat at the base of her neck but it was see through, so much so he could make out the lace pattern of her bra. And those scars, that made it impossible for him to forget what he'd seen the morgue. "I won't have my daughter looking like a whore."

She smiled, and it was both amused and leering. "But daddy, I am a whore," she told him softly in her sweet voice. She watched him swallow at her obvious defiance, but this time he was the one who could feel the storm coming. She blinked languidly up at him, that smile still carved on her mouth. "You don't wanna be late for work," she said reaching to kiss his cheek feeling how tight he clenched his jaw.

Susan came out of their room with her hair still in curlers and he stepped back, leaving with the threat of them talking about this later. Veronica was still smiling when she first let her mother hug her and then as she turned to Max who she'd heard come up behind them.

"You ready?" she asked with her keys in her hand. Max nodded the same time Billy came out of his room with only his jeans on.

"You gonna pick her up after school, take her and the boyfriend to the arcade?" he asked though it wasn't a suggestion. "I've got a date tonight," he further explained watching her expressionless face closely.

"I'm not going today."

Veronica's face finally changed as she turned to Max. "We can go if

you want, maybe stop by the record store." She could see Max thinking about it, that she wanted to, so Veronica grabbed a granola bar and handed it to her as they headed for the door. "I'd like to properly meet Lucas."

Billy stared after them as they left watching Veronica reach an arm out to grab the handle of the door. Look back, he pleaded silently. Just care. She pulled the door shut still looking at Max. You goddamn bitch.

...

She spent the day with her mother, who stuck close enough to have been her shadow. Veronica didn't mind, she missed the days before Neil, when dad wasn't there, when it was just the three of them. They were happier then. Susan let her pick dinner, asked where she'd just come from and where she was planning to go when she left. She was trying to prepare herself for Veronica leaving again. And it all but broke Veronica's heart to hear her mother's shaky voice, hating that she'd stolen part of her shine. The happiness she'd found in newfound freedom was nothing more than a bandaid on a wound too deep, and she was only now realizing she was bleeding out.

It was almost a relief when it came time to pick up Max, to get out of that stifling house that every hour felt more and more like a cage. They ended up not going to the arcade, and Veronica had seen the way Lucas' face had fallen before she declared they were getting milkshakes. It was the first real thing she'd eaten in months, the moment they got home she went to the bathroom and threw it up. Brushing her teeth she stepped out of the bathroom to sit with Max in their room as she did her homework, but her eyes flicked to Billy's room out of a habit she thought she'd forgotten.

He stood at the mirror in a half buttoned shirt fixing his curly hair from the quick shower he'd taken. She appeared next to him quiet as a ghost and he took a breath as she turned from him and rifled through his closet. He tried not to look at her, because she was just another bitch who'd left him and was going to leave him again, but he caught the heavy floral scent of her shampoo and his gaze slid to his left seeking her out.

She came back with a faded leather jacket and he lowered his arms feeling her against his back as she pulled it on him. She ran a hand over his chest smoothing the wrinkles before she stood back admiring him. "You look good."

He smirked feeling himself straighten as he fixed his hair over the jacket. "Damn right I look good," he told her sounding cocksure. But she reached a hand to a stray curl and she brushed it back like it was nothing, like he hadn't stopped breathing. His eyes found her in the mirror wearing the warmest look he thought he'd ever seen her wear. "You took my best shirt," he said admitting he knew. Getting closer to things he hadn't let himself think about.

"It looks better on me," was her simple reply as she returned her hand to her side and looked up at the side of his face.

A grin spread over his mouth as he huffed a laugh through his nose. "No arguments there." He'd always loved her in his clothes. He met her eyes in the mirror when she finally looked at him and he told her, "you were gonna ask me to come with you." He'd seen that in her eyes the day she left him, the spray of the shower dampening her cheeks in place of the tears she wouldn't shed for him. She never wanted to leave him, that's why he couldn't be angry. "We were good weren't we?"

She smiled at those memories, they'd been kinder then. "I don't think I'm good anymore." She didn't know if she even wanted to be good anymore, but being here with Max and him she suddenly found the want to try.

He didn't know what that meant, didn't understand the look in her eye because she'd been gone too long. So he shrugged in his jacket so it'd lay smoother over his broad shoulders and stepped back, putting the distance she'd created between them. "It was never gonna be me and you, right?" he callously reminded her, clapping a hand roughly on her shoulder as he turned to head out to meet his date.

She stood where he left her sighing at his feet pausing on the front step outside, hearing the heavy heated breath he released. Quietly she snuck out the front door and sat beside him on the step in the cool dusk air. "I hate you," he muttered with more venom than he

actually felt.

"I hate me too," came her softer reply, her small shoulder pressed to his as they stared at the darkening sky. They stayed that way in a gentle quiet, breathing shared air, her heart setting itself to the beat of his without her permission. She took a breath too deep and the words fell out of her mouth too fast for her to stop them. "It's always been you."

He turned with vulnerable eyes seeing the truth in hers, finding somehow they were almost green again. He really almost thought she didn't love him but looking at her now he didn't know how he missed it, she loved him so goddamn much. His mouth had just opened when headlights cut across them as Neil pulled into the driveway.

They both turned to him with glassy eyes as he slowly walked to where they sat. "Thought you had a date," Neil reminded him, the temperature in his blood turning just a little warmer. It wouldn't take much tonight, not with seeing them this close.

It always came down to Veronica, the familiarity of that almost made her smile. "I was asking if he wanted to help me surprise Max tomorrow."

Billy's face screwed up first in confusion and then in refusal. "I'm not helping you surprise our sister with a date," he scoffed pulling out his pack of cigarettes.

"Oh come on," she turned to him forgetting Neil like she usually did, "she makes this face when she's really surprised, her eyes bug out and her mouth gets all wide. It's the greatest feeling in the whole world."

Holding a cigarette between his lips he cupped his hand around the end as he lit it, glancing up at his dad as he went inside too used to their bickering to stick around anymore. "Answer's no," he told her shutting her down.

But she hummed letting a smile slide over her mouth as he looked at her, hearing the heavy drag he took already knowing how this would end. "You act like I was asking."

He huffed smoke through his nose feeling his own mouth starting to curl. "don't push it," he warned her.

"I'm gonna take that as a yes," she said not heading it.

He held a hand up with his thumb and index held an inch apart. "You're this close, Ron."

She hummed her disbelief as she stood. "What are you gonna do, Billy, blow smoke up my ass?" she asked turning to the door with a hand on the railing. But his arm suddenly snaked around her and he lifted her off her feet.

"I'll do something to that ass," he breathed in her ear as he stubbed out the half smoked stick and tossed it over the railing. It was so damn good to hear her laugh again. Pulling the door open he set her down and closed it behind him as they made their way to the kitchen to help set the table.

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Max woke to Billy having snuck into her sister's bed again and she rolled her eyes really hating them sometimes. Only this time she stood over them with furrowed brows as Billy lay with Veronica at his back with her face nestled between his shoulder blades and her arm slung over his middle. Like she was holding him, and he looked so peaceful. She knew Billy would lash out at being found in such a soft way, so Max reached across him and gently tugged at her sister's hair until she turned her head to blink blearily up at her. And when she was sure Veronica was awake she tiptoed out of their room to see Neil at least hadn't come out of their room yet to find Billy's door left wide open.

He woke to soft kisses on his jaw and his neck, behind his ear. He woke gently and he breathed easier than he had in years, feeling something almost happy. Rolling over he pressed a wet kiss to her cheek and mumbled a tired, "morning," feeling her smile.

They dragged themselves out of bed and got ready, Billy grabbed breakfast and they headed to the store to get everything but dinner for tonight. Veronica stood on the bottom rung on the cart ticking

things off the list with Billy pressed against her back as he pushed her through the store. He was hunched over her with his arms propped on the handle and his chin on her shoulder, every now and then a hand would wander up her side and he'd nip at her neck, but mostly he grabbed whatever she wordlessly pointed at.

She paid for everything with a wad of cash and he held all the bags as they walked back to his car. They passed by a very tall gruff man with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, and he met her dark eyes as she looked up at him. He walked past with his brows drawn together wondering, but memory caught up to that face and he stopped in his tracks turning to look at her climbing into a blue camero. "Son of a bitch," Hopper muttered, the cigarette falling from his mouth.

It was a normal, quiet, happy day. Susan sat in the living room with the fan going as the first signs of summer began to show, Max and Veronica laid across their beds talking the afternoon away, Billy worked out and then showered, and Veronica forced Max to sit and let her fix her up. She pulled half her hair back and painted her lips, adding a little mascara to her lashes and blush to her cheeks. Looking at herself in the mirror Max could see every part of her sister in her face. She felt pretty, and when Veronica reached a hand under her chin raising it a little so that it was almost like Max was looking down at the world she felt strong.

When it was closer to dinner their mother called Max into the living room and Veronica pulled on a dress and her shoes before sneaking out the window. She and Billy made the plan on the way home, he'd bring Max and she'd take care of everything else.

"Awesome," Lucas exclaimed when he climbed into the back of the van as she drove away from his house. They stopped once at a restaurant and Lucas stood almost ten inches taller than her with his palms already starting to sweat as she paid for the food. "It's really cool you're doing this," he told her as they drove toward the wide open field the gang hung out in sometimes.

He was supposed to be getting everything together but he kept stealing glances at her and she sighed. "Spit it out."

He almost jumped at being caught. Max saw through him just as easy. "So are you like possessed or is it like an infection, do you really eat people or do you suck their blood? Because I think you eat people but Dustin thinks you're more like a vampire."

She gave him a look in the rear view mirror. "More like a zombie I guess," she answered still not actually knowing anything. She stopped asking after a while.

He nodded like that made sense, like it's what he'd been thinking but really he was kind of freaked out about her and whether she was a demogorgon too. They'd all wondered it before deciding it wasn't possible, so she had to be something else.

They parked at the top of the hill with enough light from the setting sun to get everything ready. They laid a blanket on the grass beside the van and he set up the plates and flowers while Veronica climbed on top of the van and strung up lights attached to battery powered pack that'd come with the van. All Lucas knew for sure is that she really loved Max, and Max loved her. And maybe that was enough.

They heard the music before they saw the camero and they waited as Billy pulled up on the other side of the van. Max shoved his hand off her face, which he'd slapped on there to keep her from seeing anything. The two came around the van and Billy stopped with Max looking down at to see her face fall apart with surprise. Her eyes got wide as they darted around looking at it all, her mouth opened and closed so rapidly she could've been mistaken for a fish. And then she smiled, really big.

Veronica waited until Billy turned to her, seeing his own grin, and she jerked her head behind her. "We're gonna eat downhill, you two have fun, lights are gonna die in about two hours." Billy grabbed his food a blanket and her hand and they headed out into the dark. He pulled her a little further until the two at the top of the hill could barely be heard.

They spread the blanket out and sat side by side under the stars and just breathed. It was quiet, the warmth of the day still slipping away, and she laid her head on his shoulder. "You were right, that face was worth it," he told her, his hand on her smooth thigh.

"It's a good face," she agreed remembering how many dates he'd planned for Max to come with them when they first started dating. They'd been friends forever and she didn't wanna lose that. He'd made such an effort to show her she'd never lose him. She never meant to be something he had to lose.

"Where are you going after this?" he asked wondering where her head was at. She had to be after something, she always wanted something. He wanted this time for it to be him.

She took a breath and tilted her head back to look at the stars. "I was thinking Maine, work my way down to Florida." She felt his shoulders fall with his sigh, she knew what he was really asking. "One of us needs to graduate high school."

He turned looking at her shadowed face. "You really think that should be me?" It made her smile, they both knew she was the smart one.

But it didn't stay long, she sat up facing him and he turned to her knowing when she was serious. "Life with me is a dead end now," she told him honestly, knowing she really had no future. "If you want that I'm all yours. But Billy," she brushed her hair back wishing this was easier, "if you want more I'll understand."

The moonlight didn't offer much light but he could see her eyes shining, he could hear it in her voice. He got a hand under her chin. "More than you?" he asked her like he couldn't think of a single thing in the world he'd ever want more, and in that moment he honestly couldn't.

Sometimes he could say just the sweetest things, it didn't happen often but when he did it'd take her breath away. But she couldn't do this, not again, not with how close she'd gotten to hurting him last time.

What she didn't count on was him. He got his hand around the back of her neck pulling her mouth to his, and she sighed against him letting him pull her onto his lap. She undid the buttons of his shirt as he trailed his hands up her dress to her hips. He smirked against her mouth at finding she hadn't worn anything under it. But her hands

ran down his chest and over his stomach, his mouth opened to take a breath but she filled it with her tongue as she cupped her hands around his face holding him there.

He pulled at her arms but she didn't budge, all that strength in those little hands. He rolled them so she was under him and it gave him a little room to turn his head and kiss along her jaw, she finally eased up. With his mouth by her ear he told her breathlessly, "easy baby."

She shivered at his breath in her ear feeling something flutter in her chest, a familiar echo like a call answered. He pulled her dress over her head and kicked his pants off, and she wrapped her arms tight around his shoulders with her face half turned into his. It was always wrong; the eyes the hair, she'd hate their leering smile so much she wanted to rip them apart. But this was finally right, the only thing she'd ever really wanted. Something swelled in her chest and she sucked in a breath and held it, her legs around his bucking hips, feeling her body beginning to tremble.

When they were spent he rolled off her bringing her with him so that she lay over his chest as they caught their breath. He wasn't a gentle boy but he was for her, his hand running through her long hair. It would've been a good life. "Do you ever wonder what it'd be like if we kept it?"

She looked up at him wondering how often he thought of that, if he'd wanted it as much as she realized she had. "We would've made terrible parents," is what she told him.

"No, I would've made a terrible parent." She was great with Max, with him and Neil. She would've been a great mother, he'd do anything to give that back to her and be someone good enough to do it with her.

At his rough voice, knowing he believed that, she sat up on an elbow and looked down at his moonlit face. Reaching a hand to brush the hair off his forehead. "You don't have to be Neil if you don't want to, you know that right?" His answer was turning his face away, and she sat with a hand on his chest looking down at all this pain, wishing she could take it from him. "You can be more than him."

"You're the only one who thinks that."

She shrugged undeterred. "Only one person needs to." It needed to be him, and it said so much to her that he didn't think he could.

He gave a small laugh knowing if anyone could whip him into shape it'd be her, it was always going to be her. But his face fell because she was gonna leave again, who'd believe in him then. "Maybe I'm not good anymore either."

Maybe it really was always him. She folded her arms over his chest and rested her chin on them as she looked down at him. "Well, you graduate in two months. I'll call after, and if you decide you want a dead end life with me then I'll come get you." If they couldn't be good why not be bad together.

They got dressed and kept talking, she got out of him the first place he wanted to go with her and he honestly would've gone right then. She even convinced him to dance with her when the music from Lucas' boom box reached them. But the lights went out and the pair walked together up the hill and cleaned up before heading out, and a chilled wind crept up the back of Veronica's neck like a whisper. She knew that wordless voice. Her eyes found Billy as he stooped to help Max with something, not knowing she'd just sealed his fate.

Come Monday she dropped Max off at school with a fierce hug, turned into Billy who kissed her just as desperately, and she left. No part of her wanted to. But she could feel the first small twinges of hunger that would steadily grow until anything that moved sent her salivating.

Two months later graduation came and went, and her call never came. Billy was well and livid now, nothing she said was gonna fix this one. His eyes turned elsewhere, he wasn't gonna waste his life waiting for her to come back.

And somewhere hundreds of miles away Veronica stood over a man in the motel room he'd brought her to without asking. There was very little about her anymore that resembled who she used to be. She shoved his shoulders back forcing him to lie on the bed and she set a knee on either side of his hips and lowered herself onto him. He tried to reach for her but she waved him away the way she would have a fly.

He was used to being in control, she was such a little thing. His hands shot up grabbing her hips, trying to speed her up, but her grip tightened around his wrists like a vise and she held them against the mattress. He pulled against her but she wouldn't let go, her hips were starting to feel heavy as they crashed onto his. "What do you want me to do?" he asked in a ragged voice as she bounced on top of him

All of a sudden she stilled and he caught his breath looking up at her, and she rocked against him slow as she pulled his hands to her hips. A small smile worked its way to her mouth as her mind turned. He liked this better. She got him where she wanted him and she stopped again. His eyes were glazed as he blinked up at her, his mouth open as he panted, a plea on the tip of his tongue but he was too stubborn to beg.

Yet.

He was almost crying when she was done with him, his heart hammered too fast and too loud, he couldn't catch his breath anymore, he couldn't even think. "Please," came out of him in a soft breath. She bent over him and he stared up at her black eyes as he gasped for air he couldn't get. He couldn't speak, his lips mouthed it – please.

The face she wore as she sat up with her back held straight and proud was cold, unforgiving. She moved just a little. "Worship me," she told him, her voice a low timber with something darker underneath it. He was shaking he was so close. "Say it, I'm your goddess. All things you do you do in my name." She rocked harder hearing something close to a whimper leave him. "I give you life, the air you breathe, your blood sings my name - say it."

She stopped again and he moaned guttural and agonized. "Okay," he told her needy and desperate. "You give me life, I-I worship you. God I praise you, please."

She stilled on top of him and grew heavy, and as his weeping eyes found hers he was startled at the sight of her rippling chest as it tore itself open. "Thank you," she told him almost warmly, her hand caressing his face. His eyes widened as its lips pulled back revealing rows of teeth, and her hand shot out connecting with his throat

crushing it and his vocal cords in a single blow. His eyes bulged and his face blanched as he gaped silently up at her, suffocating. And she threw her head back with a half crazed laugh and cried out in ecstasy as she pulled him into her chest and fed.

7. we'll raise our city here

We have arrived at season 3. I'm pretty sure there's at most two chapters left. It's gonna go quick. It's a rough ride, so strap in.

She stood across the street with her back against the brick wall of a corner store, a ghost with sunlicked hair. His smile is what caught her eye, straight white teeth, sharp cheekbones and a chiseled jaw. Beautiful.

He sat at a busy cafe nursing a cup of coffee tuning out his girlfriend and his brother's wife as they chattered on and on about some other woman in their spin class who was known to get around. His brother was slumped in his chair on his second cup, and every so often they shared a bored look before turning away.

His eyes glanced across the street, looking anywhere to get out of this conversation, the world seemed to pause and the noise faded when he caught sight of her. She had the reddest hair and full supple lips he could see from the dark lipstick staining them. Her chest rose and fell slowly, her breasts swelling with each inhale threatening to burst out of the shirt that cupped them. The only sound he heard was a piercing ring in his ears that swelled behind his eyes so he couldn't see, filling his head so full he could think. Except for her.

"Caleb?" his girlfriend called when he suddenly stood, too slow to reach for him.

He didn't hear her. He didn't hear anything except that terrible ringing, her hair framing her fairytale face like a wall of flames. He had to have her, he'd die if he didn't.

"Caleb," she shrieked as he stepped off the curb.

The world suddenly flooded back and before he could catch his breath he heard the loud blare of a horn before he went under a truck.

Beneath the eruption of chaos she heard the moment his heart

stopped. Her painted mouth curled as she turned to slip away, having no further need for this place. But standing no more than a foot behind her she found a young man standing tall and lean as he waited for her to notice him. There was a flutter in her chest, an echo so faint she almost didn't recognize it. Almost. Her head tilted just slightly as she looked up at his vaguely familiar face, as though she was listening.

Dark veins crept up his neck delicate as a spider's web, she could see them pulsing with his heart beat. He held a hand out to her in quiet offering. His eyes held such pain, and hers held nothing. An empty seething abyss ready to consume this world with an insatiable hunger. She set her hand in his feeling his grip tighten to the point of breaking; possessive, desperate.

And like a call being answered the shadow that hid in the darkest corner of Hawkins Indiana began to spread, and it took on the face of the boy it knew she wanted most.

∴

She made it halfway before pulling off on a long dark stretch of road and throwing the silent man to the ground. It was much like the road she'd found the girl on, crying and bleeding. Needing her.

She looked down at his pleading eyes as she settled on top of him feeling his body betray him. It wasn't his anymore, just like she wasn't his anymore. He didn't fight as she consumed him, didn't scream or shake. She held him to her gaping chest gentle as a mother holding a babe to their breast, his eyes as black as hers as he looked up at her warm face. His breaths grew shallow and wet as blood filled his lungs, and then as her teeth broke through them it filled her mouth. He twitched several times before he grew limp, the black leaking from his eyes like tears revealing the warm brown they used to be. They were the wrong eyes, this was the wrong face, this wasn't the boy the girl wanted. Her girl. Veronica.

She left his shredded remains behind as she pulled back onto the road, her hands tapping the beat of their favorite song on the steering wheel. She could hear, very faintly, somewhere far inside her Veronica humming. And she smiled. They smiled.

∧.

"She could've killed me," Billy told Heather, his body sore and bruised. Bleeding. She didn't care. She wasn't supposed to, she served him they all did, no one was meant to care for him. Care, that had to be the boy.

He held her wrist in his hand, these humans were so fragile. So easy to break. And he'd break them all. He looked at the few he collected so far, their bodies upright and unmoving facing the body he was making for himself. They were all his, weak and pliable living only for him. And not one of them cared he'd almost died tonight.

There was a shrill groan of metal above them as the door to the cellar was pushed open, it echoed loudly around them reaching the far corners of their mind filling them with a warm loud buzzing like a hive that'd just been kicked. They trembled.

A small foot rattled the top rung of the stairs followed by another, and another, as they crept down into the dark to join them. Heather looked up and her face almost brightened with recognition as she jumped to her feet. His eyes slid left and his hands clenching ready for a fight, but he slackened with shock at seeing Veronica. His face fell apart as his chest heaved. She'd care.

But Veronica stepped around him, her eyes on Heather's that were one part adoring and two parts pleading. Veronica raised a hand brushing her hair behind her ear, Heather's eyes flooded as she leaned into her touch. Veronica caught the first tear with her thumb, brushing her cheek tenderly. She ran her knuckles across her other cheek catching the rest, and when she dried them all her hand curled under Heather's chin raising it for her.

There was a low rumbling growl and Veronica turned, her hand falling from Heather's face. She stepped down onto the floor and slipped through the still bodies that imperceptibly tilted her way, craving.

Billy grabbed the railing pulling himself to his feet, his breathing ragged and loud as he watched her step closer to that thing. It'd turn her just like him, and Heather, her parents, all of them. It'd control

her, make her do things, infect her. And still she crept closer unaware, her head falling back to look up at it as it towered over her. Something in him came alive. "Ron?" His voice sounded strange to his own ears, strained and broken. But it was his voice.

She turned looking over her shoulder as if seeing him for the first time. This boy, he picked him specifically for her. And she moved back to Billy's side, her small hand reaching for his fitting her fingers in the places between his. Binding them together. Wherever they were, trapped inside their own bodies, they responded to each other.

With his hand in hers she pulled him up the stairs with her as she led him to where she parked the van. He sat on the edge of the bed letting her clean him up, his eyes closing as she gently dabbed a wet towel at the cut on his cheek, sat still as she pulled his shirt over his head so she could look at the bruises forming on his back from where he'd been thrown through a wall.

Her hands were light as a feather as they grazed his battered skin and he almost shivered. He looked up as she climbed off the bed, his hand shooting out to grab her arm. To hold her, to feel her and know she was there. She blinked slowly as she stepped into the space between his feet. His breathing was heavy, his eyes wet. Almost timidly he let his head fall to her chest, burying his face in her warmth as his arms encircled her waist squeezing hard enough he could've cut her in half.

His breathing stuttered at her hands in his hair, at the love. The fucking love of it. His shoulders shook and she held a hand around his head cradling him to her.

There was a memory attached to this; of a black eye and belt marks down his back, and her holding him as he cried. The fucking love of it.

Without warning he lifted his head pressing his mouth hers. She was frozen with surprise feeling a tear slide between their cheeks, but a breath left her the kind she'd sigh after coming home from a long trip and she leaned forward getting control. He bunched the end of her shirt in his hand and dragged it over her head, feeling her unbuttoning his jeans.

It was like they were Veronica and Billy again, as if they could still be Veronica and Billy. As if they both didn't know how this had to end.

He let her shove his shoulders back, wincing at the pain, and he looked up at her with his hands on her hips as she rocked against him. Her eyes were almost green, so dark he could barely see it, could barely see her. She stopped suddenly and blinked down at him, her brows creased as though deep in thought. The lines carved on her chest shifted as deep purple flesh writhed beneath it, and he watched it unfurl like petals covered in sharp teeth.

His loud heavy breaths filled the air around them as he gaped up at her, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes as he finally understood. And she waited looking for fear, disgust, loathing, all of which would ruin her. But he sat up bringing his chest to hers, shuddering at its wet flesh and its teeth grazing his skin. She looked down at his upturned face, and all she saw was trust. The fucking love of it. She sighed letting her forehead rest over his, her hands cupping his face. And for a moment, a gentle fleeting moment, they were just Veronica and Billy.

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The sunlight glinted off every strand of her hair like the burning embers of a cigarette butt moments before it ignited a forest fire. That's what caught his innocent eye. And he blinked thinking she looked like one of the girls in his brother's magazines with her soft full lips and the shirt that ended just under her breasts, he could see them through the thin fabric. Almost too big to fit in his hands. Those thoughts weren't as innocent, he was at the age where he was slowly losing that more. His brother had outgrown his innocence but he was still too young to consider a man, and he swallowed heavily as she turned to them both.

"Hello boys," she said in a voice smooth and thick like honey. She breathed deep and the hem of the shirt rode up so they could just barely see a glimpse of round heavy flesh. Her lips parted around her teeth as she smiled.

A rough hand grabbed the side of either of their heads and slammed them into each other, they hit the ground with a sick thump one after

the other. Billy's eyes were wet as he looked at them, the youngest couldn't have been more than thirteen. She stepped closer and he looked up, pleading. But her eyes were black and empty as they flicked to his without mercy. Wherever Veronica was she wasn't in them. His body bent as his hands grabbed one of them and threw them in the back of the van.

If you're interested in me explaining some details please stick around, if not you can skip reading this part.

I've been feeling like I haven't made it clear explaining what's been going on with Veronica. Apart from info dumping randomly in the story there's no way to really show it, other than me hinting at it. And I don't think I'm doing a good job of that.

So a few things:

It's heightening the worst parts of Veronica. She's always used men's attraction to get what she wants, evidenced by almost every interaction with Neil.

If this is its first experience with humans then that first experience was watching Veronica being raped and killed. So its views are a little twisted, on top of Veronica's trauma. Which is why it kills the way it does, and it's why she's always on top because she's taking back her power. Only time you'll ever see her on her back is with Billy.

At first Veronica was fighting it trying not to hurt Max or Billy, which is why she kept throwing up. She was adjusting. And she slowly starts accepting it a little and that was the first taste of it being in control. And it's not until she came back and actually thought she might have a chance with Billy and maybe get to be with Max that she let her guard down enough it completely took over. Which is where we are now, it's not really Veronica anymore.

Also, I don't know if anyone's noticed the way the demodogs and the flayed respond to her. But it's gentle and sweet, and she is warm and nurturing. In my head I've been picturing this thing inside her is like the mother of monsters. Add in Neil forcing Veronica to have an abortion and she's left with this constant aching emptiness where she should have a

child. So she filled the role of mother of monsters well.

Also I wanted to just note with the first scene, it's now killing for sport.

That's all. Thank you for coming to my ted talk.